

# A Gem in the Rough

*by drillmaster*

When Steven accidentally activates an ancient Gem weapon, he finds himself on the Grand Line on the ship of the "Mr. 5 Pair" heading for Little Garden. How will they react to a youth that fell out of the sky? How will this impact the quest to save Alabasta? What will the Gems do to get Steven back? Steven Universe is created by Rebecca Sugar. One Piece is created by Eiichiro Oda.

Rated: Fiction K+ - English - Miss Goldenweek, Miss Valentine, Mr. 5, Steven U. - Chapters: 46 - Words: 217,893 - Reviews: 322 - Favs: 228 - Follows: 170 - Updated: 4/18 - Published: 11/24/2015 - Status: Complete - id: 11631833

URL: <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/11631833>

# Table of Contents

## Table of Contents

1. The Rifting Stone
2. The Surprise Guest Of The 'Mr 5 Pair'
3. The House Of Wax
4. The Painter And The Half-Gem
5. The Unexpected Phone Call
6. The Candle Service Set
7. The Broken Promise
8. The Multiverse
9. The Guest Of Honor
10. The Bored Painter
11. The Avalanche
12. The Climb Up The Mountain
13. The Blue-Nosed Reindeer
14. The Snow Angel
15. The Would-Be King
16. The Gems' Quest
17. The Training
18. The Okama
19. The Plan To End All Plans

20. The Nanohana Cantina
21. The Desert Kingdom
22. The Eight O'Clock Meeting
23. The Sea Stone Cage
24. The Gauntlets In the Sand
25. The Lingering Doubts
26. The Shichibukai And The Half-Gem
27. The Absurdity of Alabasta
28. The Gun Dog And The Bomb Man
29. The First Rule Of Assassination
30. The Fake King of Alabasta
31. The Bomb In The Square
32. The Near-Ending Carnival
33. The Escalating Day
34. The Reluctant Handshake
35. The Awkward Introductions
36. The Furious Mother
37. The Balancing Of Rocks
38. The Bubbles And The Dinner
39. The Beach-A-Palooza Performance
40. The Day After The Rave
41. The Best-Kept Secret In Beach City

- 42. The Contrivance Factor
- 43. The Cleanup On The Boardwalk
- 44. The Duel And The Dream
- 45. The Return To The Status Quo
- 46. The Creator Commentary

# The Rifting Stone

Beach City: the name says it all. A populated area by the water, all of its occupants were happy and content with the quaint lives they lead. This can all be traced back to the city's magical guardians: the Crystal Gems. The Gems were three alien "women" (technically, they were just genderless, polymorphic, sentient rocks who projected a female body from their gemstones) whose power was derived by the very rocks that fueled their life sources. There was Garnet: a tall, shapely female whose afro and sunglasses just exuded coolness; Pearl: the dainty, delicate peach-blond-haired Gem whose gemstone extended from her forehead; and lastly Amethyst: the squat, purple skinned, fun-loving member of the trio. These three, and these three alone, always saved the day. Regardless of what anyone thought, they always found a way to prevail.

And then there was Steven Universe: the odd boy out of the group.

Steven is the only known male Gem. This is mainly because he is also the only half-Gem in existence: the product of the love between Greg Universe and Rose Quartz. Inheriting his late mother's shield and (on-again/off-again) healing powers, Steven held just as much of a claim as the other Gems for the role of Beach City's protector.

"Gems! We might have found the Rifting Stone!" Garnet told the group on a day like any other.

"Wha...?!" Pearl cried out. "But the Rifting Stone was thought to be destroyed on the Strawberry Battlefield!"

Steven cocked his head in curiosity. "What's a 'Rifting Stone?'"

Touching her forehead, an image of a rock illuminated the small beach house where Steven lived. "The Rifting Stone is an ancient Gem weapon that allowed its user to create a rift in space to allow travel from place to place..."

"A personal Gem teleporter?!" Steven asked excitedly.

"It is more complicated than that, Steven," Pearl tried again.

"Though it might send you from place to place, it is dangerous to cross between the rifts of space and time. We have lost many Gems through its use...which is why we have updated to the Warp Pad."

"But...it IS a personal Gem teleporter?" Steven pried.

The Gem sighed. "Yes. Yes it is. We need to bubble it and fully destroy it before it claims another life."

"This mission will be too dangerous for you, Steven," Garnet started to say before she stopped herself. Steven had worked so hard to be a part of the team. It was time to show him that he deserved a place with them. "...unless you bring your Cheeseburger Backpack."

Stars filled the youth's eyes as he stared at the Gem in awe. He ran over to her and gave her a big hug. "Thank you, Garnet! I'll go pack! I'll bring a change of clothes just in case!"

As the boy ran to his room, the other two Gems gave Garnet an odd look. "I would have bet anything that you were going to tell him not to come," Amethyst folded her arms.

"Well why IS he coming?" Pearl demanded. "The Stone is dangerous and if something were to happen..."

"We need to give Steven the time to grow and mature. If we keep him back, he will never learn," Garnet told them with a finality in her voice. "Besides, the Stone hasn't worked in thousands of years. It shouldn't start now."

\*AGITR\*

The Gems teleported to the furthest edges of the Strawberry Battlefield. Though now overrun with wild strawberries, it was once the location of some of the deadliest battles of the entire Gem Rebellion for the fate of the planet Earth. Though Steven had been here before, he never visited this section of the field and, as any child would be, was curious about it.

"So, why was this part of the Battlefield closed off before?" Steven asked.

"It was a precautionary measure," Pearl went on. "Some of the weapons that went off had done major damage to the entire landscape. It was uninhabitable for years."

"...but wouldn't it have cleared up by the first time we visited here?"

"...yes," Pearl said quickly. "Honestly, we just didn't know if there would be any residual effects on humans. Thankfully, it seems our worrying was all for nothing!"

Amethyst laughed. "You mean YOUR worrying!"

"AMETHYST!" Pearl snapped before regaining her composure. "It is always better to be on the safe side."

Over the next hour, the four Gems searched high and low for any sign of the Gem artifact with no luck. By this point, Steven had managed to wander off on his own, chasing butterflies among the strawberries.

"I'm going to catch you!" he laughed to himself. Suddenly, he tripped on the ground. As he fell, he tried to cover his face but instead just scrapped his elbows. "Ow! That hurts!"

He looked to the ground to try to find what he tripped on and his eyes made contact with a half-buried stone. "Alright Mister Rock, you are going to keep having people trip on you if you stay like that! I'll just dig you up and send you on your way!"

He pulled the rock out with all of his might until he went flying back toward the ground. This time, however, he did not hit the ground.

He was falling in the air.

"What?! How...the rock! Oh no! I'm in a rift! AHHHHHHHH!"

The boy fell fast to the ground below...except there was no ground, as Steven quickly realized. It seemed that somehow the Rifting Stone had transported him to a world full of water.

"Ahhhh! Why can't Lapis be here? She'd save me...or Lion? OR ANYONE!" he panicked as he plummeted to the sea below.

"Wait!" Steven snapped his fingers. "I can make a bubble so I don't drown...and get my backpack wet!" He clapped fast and a giant pink sphere surrounded him.

Of course, this would not stop Steven's descent into the sea...or protect him from the ocean dwellers below the surface. But as he was focusing on the bubble, he failed to notice that he was on a collision course with a small boat not that far away from him...

\*AGITR\*

"How will we ever make it to Little Garden, Mr. 5, when it took all we had left to get out of Whiskey Peak?" a female voice asked on the aforementioned boat.

"We need to press on or the boss will put the press down on us, Miss Valentine..." a male replied.

The two people sighed. Both of their bodies were covered in bruises and it was clear they engaged in a fight...and lost miserably. Miss Valentine was a thin, blonde-haired woman who wore a yellow hat and a dress with lemons on it. Her partner, Mr. 5, was a dark-haired gentleman in a trench coat and sunglasses. Together they formed the "Mr. 5 Pair" of the Baroque Works Organization.

"If we don't catch up with that Straw Hat crew and get our hands on Princess Vivi...well let's not think of the implications..." Mr. 5 finished, causing both of them to shudder.

"The last thing we want is for the 'Mr. 4 Pair' or the 'Mr. 3 Pair' to be sent after us to 'rectify' our failure," Miss Valentine rubbed her temples. "This is so stressful. I would kill for some tea right now."

"It would just rile you up. You know you are a lightweight," Mr. 5 said while picking his nose.

"I SAID TEA, NOT SHERRY!" she yelled.

"I heard what you said. The caffeine alone would put you on a rush that would...do you hear yelling?"

The two looked up to see a pink cannonball fly toward the dingy ship



they commandeered. "We are under attack!"

"But there aren't any ships near us at all!" Miss Valentine screamed. She picked up her umbrella and squatted down. **"1 Kilo!"**

The blonde-haired woman jumped high in the air to try to stop the projectile weapon from striking the ship. But when she floated up to the sphere, she shockingly realized it wasn't a cannonball at all: it was a little boy.

"Wha...? MR. 5!" she tried to call down, but the bubble boy sped right past her and hit the water around the ship with an intense power. The resulting waves tore into the ship at fast speeds. Though it was not enough to destroy the ship, it was enough to strike the unsuspecting Baroque Works officer with such intensity that he managed to fall overboard. "MR. 5!"

The woman plummeted down to her vessel as fast as she could. Dread filled her heart. Mr. 5 ate a Devil Fruit, the Bomb Bomb Fruit to be precise, which meant that the man lost the ability to swim. Though they rarely admitted it, the two partners did consider themselves friends and to lose one of the Pair would be disastrous, both for the emotional trauma and from the boss, who would no doubt kill the remaining Agent for their failure.

To her surprise, the bubble popped after a moment and revealed the young boy inside. He had curly black hair, was wearing a salmon pink shirt with a yellow star on it, and...a backpack shaped like a cheeseburger? Her surprise of the boy was strengthened by the fact that he seemed to have debubbled purely to swim after Mr. 5.

Who was this kid?

\*AGITR\*

When Steven collided with the water, he nearly had a heart attack. He had survived somehow, but he still had no idea where he was and how to contact the Gems. He looked into his hands and saw that he still held onto the stone.

"The Rifting Stone! I need to get to dry land and get this thing going

again...but I don't even know how I did it in the first place!" Steven buried his head into his hand and started to cry until he made a startling revelation.

"Is that guy...is that guy drowning?! Ahhh! I knocked him off of his boat! I have to save him!" Steven put the Rifting Stone into the backpack and clapped his hands, popping the bubble that had kept him dry and saved his life. Now it was time to do the same for the man who he sent overboard.

He took a deep breath (something he was getting better at thanks to his time with Lion, his pet...lion) and swam down after the man. The man seemed to be sinking like a brick and Steven hoped he would have the strength to pull him up. Diving down with all of his might, he made it to the older gentleman. He pulled at him, not as heavy as he feared but not as light as he hoped, and dragged him back to the surface as fast as he could before he ran out of breath.

At last, he reached the surface and pulled up the drowning person, the man gasping for air and coughing up water. From the nearby boat, a woman looked over, seemingly relieved, and reached her hand out to try to pull them to safety. Using the last bit of energy he had, he held onto her as she brought them on board.

"Mr. 5! Are you okay?" she asked, seemingly ignoring Steven for the moment. He didn't think anything of it, since she was clearly worried about her friend.

After a short coughing fit, the man called Mr. 5 wiped off his glasses and spit up some water. "What...what even was that? What hit me?"

"Ask the kid who saved your life...after nearly killing you in the process!" the woman pointed to Steven. Now that she put it that way, Steven felt terrible. He had no idea where he was and how he even activated the Rifting Stone. Now he realized that he put these people's lives in danger.

Feeling overwhelming guilt, the boy passed out on the deck.

"...well, now what?" the woman asked.

# **The Surprise Guest Of The 'Mr 5 Pair'**

"Oh...my head!" Steven groaned as he came to his senses.

He had no idea how long he was out of it, but he vaguely remembered swimming in an ocean. Had he been out with Connie and his dad and he just forgot about it? At once, the memories of the Rifting Stone came back to him. The Strawberry Battlefield, the collapse into the ocean, trying to save the jacketed gentlemen...it was an overwhelming experience to say the least.

Steven got up and looked around. It seemed as if he were placed on a small bed in a small room. It was incredibly bare-bones, but Steven remembered that he was probably still on the ship and, as such, was nowhere near dry land. He moved to the door and opened it up, allowing him to see the beauty that he missed before.

The ocean was magnificent. The calming blue waves hit the sides of the ship at a soothing pace. Steven found himself not to be seasick at all, which was a good thing as he still could not see dry land. The clouds littered the sky in an elegant way, like paint on a canvas. It was a beautiful sight to behold, only tainted by the fact that he was now alone without his family or friends.

"Where am I? Where are those people from before?" Steven asked himself as he roamed around the ship a bit more. It was at this point that he realized that he was wearing a shirt two sizes too big and pants that were cut down to match his size. "Wait, where are my clothes?!"

"Oh, you're awake kid," a familiar voice spoke from inside another entrance. Steven turned around and found himself face to face with the blonde-haired lady and the man he saved from before. "As for your clothes, you were soaking wet. We are airing them out for you. Sorry, I don't have any kid's clothes so I cut you up one of my spares."

"Thank you!" Steven said happily. "You didn't have to!"

"You dived in after me. It was the least I could do...for now," the man

folded his arms. "You got a name, punk?"

"I'm Steven, Steven Universe! And I'm sorry about that. I'm really confused about a lot right now..."

The woman raised an eyebrow. "You fall out of the sky in a pink cannonball and YOU'RE the one who is confused. That's hilarious! Kyahahahaha!"

Steven started to laugh too. "You laugh funny!"

"Rude brat!" she snarled.

"Hey! That's not a nice thing to say!" Steven retorted.

Her eyes narrowed. "Making fun of my laugh isn't a nice thing either. You need some lessons in etiquette."

The boy bowed his head in shame. "I'm sorry...uh, nice lady? I don't even know who you are...or why you have black and blues all over your body."

"You may call me Miss Valentine and my companion Mr. 5. Don't worry about the bruises."

"Mister...Five?" Steven cocked his head. "Is that your real name? That's weird!"

"For the record, it's a code name! Code name! You don't need to know my real name!" Mr. 5 yelled in irritation.

"Oh! It's like a wrestler or a superhero! That's so cool!" Steven clapped his hands eagerly.

The two adults looked at each other in confusion and then in annoyance. "So...Steven, was it? Care to answer a few questions for us?" Miss Valentine pulled up a chair and motioned for the boy to sit down. He complied happily.

"Fire away! After you're done, maybe you can help me with my own!"

"Yeah, sure, whatever..." she handwaved the comment. "What were you doing attacking our ship?"

"I didn't know anything about your ship! I don't even know where I am! One second I was chasing a butterfly, the next I was falling out of the sky!"

"Really now?" Mr. 5 added. "A likely story. Care to explain the pink cannonball you arrived in?"

It took Steven a second to figure out what he was talking about before it clicked together. "Oh! You mean my bubble!" At once, his stomach glowed a bright pink and the familiar spherical construct appeared around the boy.

Miss Valentine hit the bubble with her umbrella, seemingly impressed. "You made this by yourself...without the aid of a Devil Fruit?"

"Devil Fruit?" Steven asked, popping the bubble. "What's a 'Devil Fruit?'"

"You mean you are on the Grand Line and you don't even know what Devil Fruit are?" Miss Valentine hit her face and shook her head. "How do you expect to make it here at all?"

"Grand...Line?"

There was a pause in the air. The two adults looked at each other and then at the child. "Do...do you really not know anything?"

"Nope!" Steven said. He began to worry. "I...I think I'm in trouble. I think when I touched the Rifting Stone I didn't end up on another part of the planet...I ended up on another planet! Oh no! What am I going to do?!"

"What are you going on about? 'Rifting Stone'...'planets?'" Mr. 5 tapped his finger to his nose. "I am having a hard time following this."

"Well..." Steven started before taking a moment to consider it. "I don't really know. I think I'm from another dimension. I went to

another dimension this one time but I didn't realize that it was actually another dimension until later. It was kind of weird and we don't like talking about it..."

"...what?" Mr. 5 smacked his face in irritation.

"How about this; you said 'we.' Is that your crew?" Miss Valentine tried to keep her composure.

"Crew? I guess you mean the Crystal Gems!" Steven had a smile on his face when he thought of them.

The two waited for a few moments to see if he was going to follow that up...he didn't. "And they are...?"

"Well...oh I know! Do either of you have a guitar or a ukulele?"

"What kind of question is that?!" they both yelled.

"It's okay. I can do it a cappella! Ahem!" He breathed in and started tapping his feet. *"If you're evil and you're on the rise, you can count on the four of us bringing you down! 'Cause we're good and evil never beats us! We'll win the fight and then go out for pizzas! We! Are the Crystal Gems! We'll always save the day! And if you think we can't, we'll always find a way! That's why the people of this world believe in Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl and STEVEN!"*

The adults just stared in shock and horror at the boy who just performed a literal song in front of them. It was clear they had no idea how to respond to something like that.

"I'm at a loss for words," Mr. 5 finally managed to get it out.

"What the hell was that?" Miss Valentine asked. "Did you make that up?"

"I wrote it myself!" Steven said with a smile.

"I think I get it: you're a musician," Miss Valentine said, trying to justify the spontaneous outburst into song.

"As a hobby," Steven admitted. "My dad was a rock star, but now he

runs a car wash!"

"What's a car wash?" Mr. 5 asked, half-bored at this point.

"It's where you wash your car!"

"Okay then. That makes sense," he nodded. "What's a car?"

Now it was Steven's turn to look confused. "You don't have cars here? You know, vroom vroom?" He pantomimed driving the vehicle, running in circles on the deck.

"This kid is going to make me sick," Mr. 5 groaned.

"Forget the car!" Miss Valentine snapped. "How did you make the bubble?"

"From my gem!" Steven pulled up his shirt. The two Baroque Works Agents, who were tolerating the boy up until this point, got the shock of their lives. Where his belly button should be was a pink gemstone. "It was my mom's gem, but she passed it on to me when I was born."

"And you keep it...in your belly button?" the blonde gagged.

Steven laughed. "No, it IS my belly button! My dad said it was kind of like my umbilical cord...whatever that is," he shrugged. "That's how Gems work."

"And your 'gem' can surround you in a bubble? That's just plain weird," Mr. 5 said as he picked his nose.

"So you are some kind of super-powered kid from another dimension that can create a bubble from his stomach?" Miss Valentine tried to piece together every bit of what he was saying.

"I think so?" Steven guessed. "It's confusing when you put it like that."

"What about that stone thing you mentioned?"

Steven frowned and looked around. "Have you seen my

Cheeseburger Backpack?"

"Kyahahaha! That stupid-looking thing?" Miss Valentine pointed to the other doorway. "It's in there drying with your clothes."

"Don't knock the Cheeseburger Backpack!" Steven ran over to the drying novelty item and pulled out the Rifting Stone and ran back. "This is it! This is the Rifting Stone!"

He showed it to the two people, who looked it over inquisitively. "What does it do?"

"It's a Gem artifact that works as a personal teleporter, but it does so by creating rifts through dimensions...at least that's how Pearl described it. I just don't know how I got it to send me here...and how to send me back to my family."

"That's a tough break, kid," Mr. 5 told him plainly.

Miss Valentine, on the other hand, gave him a decidedly more sympathetic look. "I was going to make some tea before you arrived. Would you like any?"

"You know, I've never had tea," Steven observed. "Connie's mom drinks it though, so it must be good!"

"Kyahahaha! That it is!"

\*AGITR\*

The kitchen was rather small in regards to the one in Steven's beach house, which wasn't large to begin with, but it seemed right at home with the boat. Miss Valentine began to make the tea while Steven sat at the table.

"So what do you two do?" Steven asked innocently.

"What do you mean?" Miss Valentine asked somewhat nervously.

"I mean, are you sailors? I don't know much about this place at all, but it seems to be a lot of ocean."



"We...we are searching for a princess," Miss Valentine said after a moment.

"A PRINCESS?! That is so cool! You are like Mueo and Lue! Oh, you probably don't have the *Super Mueo Bros.* games here...but still!" The boy practically jumped out of his seat. "Where is she?!"

"With a bunch of pirates we are following," she explained carefully. "We lost them on the previous island and are hoping to get them at Little Garden."

"Little...Garden?" Steven repeated.

"It's the next island. There are a lot of islands in our...dimension I guess," she sighed. "I sound like an idiot."

"I don't think so!" Steven smiled. Then he paused as he took in exactly what she said. "Wait...you said 'pirates?'"

"Yes."

"As in '*pillage and plunder and rifle and loot*' pirates?"

"Um...yes, that's right," she acknowledged the tea cups. "Do you like lemons? You can have it put in your...are you okay?"

Steven had started to clap his hands excitedly and started bouncing up and down on his toes. "There are pirates here! I'm going on an awesome pirate adventure! Connie would have loved to see this!"

"You're excitable aren't you?"

"I'm a young kid; what do you expect?" Steven shrugged. "So, are those pirates the ones that hurt you and Mr. 5?" He pointed to the bruises on her arm that she instinctively covered up.

"You'd be right," she said bitterly. "The Straw Hat Luffy and the former pirate hunter Zoro..."

"Did they have those 'Devil Fruit' things?"

"The Straw Hat brat did. He's a rubber man apparently."

"I have no idea what that means!" Steven said cheerfully.

Miss Valentine set down her tea cup and tapped her finger to the side of her hat. After a moment, she adopted a large grin. "Pick me up."

"What?"

"Pick me up!" she demanded.

"But...but why?" Steven stammered. "I don't get it!"

"JUST DO IT!"

Shaking a bit after being yelled at, Steven gently put his hands around her waist and tried to lift her up. With all of his strength he lifted her a foot off of the floor.

"Good try. For someone your age, you are pretty strong. Now, try again."

"You want me to do it again?!" Steven asked right after he put her down.

**"1 Kilo! Lift me up!"**

Steven raised an eyebrow as he panted hard. "Okay...but I still have no idea what this has to do with...WHAT?!"

Steven was amazed. The woman now weighed as light as a feather! "HOW DID YOU DO THAT?!"

"I ate a Devil Fruit called the Kilo Kilo Fruit! I can change my weight from being several tons to being as light as air!" Miss Valentine explained with a smile. Steven threw her up and caught her without an issue at all. Stars filled his eyes as she floated down to the floor.

"Devil Fruits give you superpowers! This place is so cool! Does Mr. 5 have that power too?"

"Kyahahahaha! No, he ate the Bomb Bomb Fruit. He can turn any part of his body into a bomb...he's practically a living weapon. That's why

he couldn't swim when he landed overboard."

"So if you eat a Devil Fruit, you basically drown in water?" Steven tried to make sense of it.

"Correct."

"Does that mean you can't take a bath?!" Steven asked worryingly.

"NO IT DOESN'T!" she yelled. "I can touch water, but I can't swim in it!"

"I think I get it. You guys are weird," With that, his stomach started to growl. "Uh, I guess it's been awhile since I've eaten anything. Do you have any food?"

The blonde-haired woman chuckled and opened up a door. She pulled out a plate full of chocolate. "There wasn't much food on board here when we...boarded this boat, but I have some fresh chocolate if you'd like. Don't kids like chocolate?"

"CHOCOLATE!" Steven eyed the dessert eagerly. He took a bite of it and his eyes bulged out.

"This chocolate...is SO GOOD!" Steven grabbed another piece. "Whoever made this was gifted in the kitchen!"

Miss Valentine started to blush and tried to hide it from the little boy. "Come on, Steven. Let's take our tea to the bridge and you can tell us all about your world. We should be docking soon."

"Yay!" Steven cheered, hoping that he was one step closer to getting back to his family.

'He said I was gifted,' Miss Valentine thought about the comment for a long while. 'Nobody has ever talked about my chocolate like that.'

With that, she allowed herself to smile while Steven went on about Gems, monsters, and a horrible creature called Onion. 'I think he is growing on me after all,' she concluded.

# The House Of Wax

The small boat finally docked on the circular island. Steven marveled at the sight of the giant mountains and exploding volcanoes. Trees and tall grass covered the island completely. It was an amazing sight compared to Beach City. Not that he was knocking his home town, but Steven had to allow himself to enjoy the spectacle. He had a firm hope that he would be able to activate the Rifting Stone when they hit dry land so he could return to his family. Until then, at least he had lucked out and landed with two nice people, though with odd code names, who were willing to help him out.

"So this is where those bad guys you were chasing ended up?" Steven asked curiously.

"Apparently," Mr. 5 started to pick his nose again. "We are just following their trail. The rest is up to fate."

"What can I do to help?"

The two Agents shot each other a look. "Well...Steven, we don't want you to get hurt. These are dangerous people who we are dealing with. Their captain even has Devil Fruit powers," Miss Valentine said gently, trying to dissuade him from going with them.

This was not the answer Steven wanted to hear. He frowned and pouted a little. "But I can help! I've been in big fights before! I even went to outer space and helped stop Jasper and Peridot from attacking the city!"

"Your' city, Steven. This world is different from the planet or dimension or wherever you are from. We just don't want you getting hurt," Miss Valentine tried again.

"Well why don't we just let him come?" Mr. 5 sighed. "We aren't his parents and can't stop him if we wanted."

"He's just a boy!"

"I'M RIGHT HERE YOU KNOW!" Steven yelled, stopping the two in their tracks. "Stop talking about me like I'm not here! Of course; just when Garnet thinks that I am ready for more dangerous missions, I get sent here! Why won't anyone give me a chance?!"

Silence filled the air as the boat washed ashore. Miss Valentine had a look of pity in her eyes while Mr. 5 cocked a grin. Steven started to pant and then stormed off to the small quarters that he woke up in. "I'm getting changed back into my clothes!" After a moment, the two adults were alone at last. Mr. 5 suddenly slammed his hand on the railing of the boat.

"What has gotten into you, Miss Valentine?!" Mr. 5 growled at her. "You're a Baroque Works Agent, not a babysitter! You don't even like kids!"

Miss Valentine looked over the edge and into the forest in front of her. "I...I don't know! Maybe it's his optimism...maybe it's the fact that he thinks that we are good people...it just stirred something back up in me that I haven't felt in a long time."

Mr. 5 regarded her with an open mouth. "Am I hearing this right? The Miss Valentine who would float up in the air, drop down on a person, and laugh at them while counting the bones cracking in their spine is not the same one I am talking to right now! What could he have possibly said that caused you to feel this way?!"

"He...he said that he liked my chocolate," she told him gently. "I didn't even tell him that I made it. He just said that whoever made it was gifted. Gifted!"

"Don't tell me you are seriously falling for that crap!" Mr. 5 whispered harshly. "You can make chocolate all you want in the utopia that Mr. 0 will make for us! He is just a confused kid who is latching onto the first people he met! What do you want us to do?"

"Take him with us! Bring him to Alabasta to meet up with the others! I don't know if he can get home with his magic rock, but if he can't we can at least make a home for him here!" Miss Valentine started to walk away from him. She turned back suddenly with the color drained from her face. "He can come along on the mission, but if

that damn Straw Hat lays a finger on him, I will not only break every rubber bone in his body, but I will break your nose!"

Mr. 5 blinked fast under his sunglasses and rubbed his temples. "Damn it. I hate it when she's pissed."

\*AGITR\*

"It's really hot here," Steven whined. "How can all of these plants survive the heat?"

"Do I look like a florist to you?" Mr. 5 grumbled.

"The islands on this ocean are all different from each other. Depending on where they are on the Grand Line, the climates and landscape might differ completely," Miss Valentine tried to explain.

"Thanks for the history lesson, Miss Valentine," Mr. 5 grumbled.

The woman knocked him on the shoulder in response. "You're lucky I like you!"

"So kid," Mr. 5 asked, picking his nose nonchalantly. Steven gagged a bit at the filthy habit. "Are you going to try your warping stone thing?"

Steven's eyes widened and nodded intensely. He put down his now dry Cheeseburger Backpack and pulled out the Rifting Stone. He shook it around a bit and looked around. "Hmm...so what did I do last time?" he asked himself. He snapped his fingers and started to dig a hole in the ground.

"The Rifting Stone was wedged into the ground and I tripped on it!" Steven said excitedly. He put the stone into the hole and covered it up, leaving the top of it exposed. He then moved away from the hole and started to run towards it. "Look at me! I'm chasing butterflies in the Strawberry Battlefield! I sure hope I don't trip on any rocks today!"

When his foot connected with the rock, Steven yelled "Woah! I'm falling!"

Miss Valentine and Mr. 5 looked around. "You're still here, Steven. It didn't work."

"I'm not done yet!" Steven shook his hands. "The last thing I did was I tried to pull it out of the ground. Then I fell backwards and the next thing I knew I was falling toward your ship!" He spit on his hands and rubbed them together. "Thank you both so much for everything! I had a lot of fun with you! Good luck catching the bad guys!" he told them as he pulled the stone out of the ground. He fell backwards and shut his eyes.

"Is that you, Garnet?" Steven asked, peeking out of his now partially closed eyes.

"Not even close," Mr. 5 grunted.

"WHY DIDN'T IT WORK?" Steven pounded his fists into the ground. "If that didn't do it, how do I get home?!"

Miss Valentine bent down and patted him on the shoulder. "Keep trying. It will work eventually."

"I hope so," Steven muttered. The boy started to explore the wildlife that inhabited this island in awe, hoping to be distracted from the disappointment he was feeling. As he did that the two Agents held back a bit.

"What do we do when we find the Straw Hat and Princess Vivi?" Mr. 5 asked. "Teach the kid about how to murder?"

"Steven knows that we are after pirates. Things do happen in fights," Miss Valentine pointed out.

"Just remember: the mission is the priority, not the well-being of some kid who fell out of the sky and practically killed me!"

"He saved your life."

"He endangered it!" he countered.

"Say," Steven called to them after humming to himself a bit. "You said your name isn't really Mr. 5, right?"

"I told you already, I'm not telling you my name!" he said defensively.

"It's not that!" Steven waved his hands. "Are there other people with code names like yours?"

The two Baroque Works Agents looked to each other uncertainly. "Yes there are. It's part of our...club. Why do you ask?"

Steven pointed to the area he was at before. "Well, there was a small little ship over there with the number 'three' all over it. I thought that if there wasn't one already I might take the code name Mr. 3 and catch pirates with you guys!"

"MR. 3?!" they both yelled at the same time.

The boy looked at the two of them in confusion. "Are you two okay? You look scared."

"If the 'Mr. 3 Pair' is here, then they are either here to finish our assignment or with an assignment of their own...what do we do?!" Miss Valentine worried.

"We find that candle brain and tell him that the Straw Hat is OUR assignment and to stay out of our business!"

"ADVENTURE TIME!" Steven shouted.

Miss Valentine adopted a serious look on her face. "Steven, this might be too dangerous of a..."

"No!" Steven stood his ground. "I told you I'm coming and I want to help!"

"...there isn't ANYTHING we can do to get you to stay on the ship?" she tried once again.

"Nope!" he smiled. "Lead the way, Mr. 5!"

'The kid's got guts. I guess I can respect that,' Mr. 5 thought to himself, but dismissed it the second the kid started singing...again.

*"Marching, marching, marching without care! Walking in the woods*



*with the 'Mr. 5 Pair!' Now's not the time to break down due to stress! We'll stop the pirates and save the princess! This kind of task is fun and not a chore. Let's move right along and...IS THAT A DINOSAUR?!"*

Steven's jaw dropped to the ground. Sure enough, a large dinosaur had crossed the paths of the three people. Its large features were straight out of a text book...save the lack of feathers. But since Steven was desensitized thanks to television, he had no way of knowing that they were not anatomically correct to the dinosaurs of his world.

"YOU GUYS HAVE DINOSAURS HERE?!"

"On this island maybe. This place is stuck in the prehistoric times," Mr. 5 shrugged. "And how did you manage to make that rhyme with that song?"

Steven cocked his head. "What are you talking about?"

"Never mind. I could really care less."

\*AGITR\*

After some searching in the woods, and much impromptu singing and humming by Steven much to Mr. 5's dismay, the trio came across a small wax house with a chimney on the roof. Smoke billowed out of it, which was how the group found it in the first place.

"Stay behind us, Steven," Miss Valentine warned him. "Mr. 3 can be a bit...temperamental."

"If he's anything like you, I'm sure I'll be fine!"

They opened the door and peered inside. Sure enough, two people were in the house. The first was a man who wore glasses and had his hair made up like a three. The other was a young girl around Steven's age who was sleeping in the corner with her hat covering her eyes.

"You have some nerve coming here," the man said as he sipped his tea. "Mr. 5. Miss Valentine. Hmm?" The man peered over his

glasses to look at the unfamiliar boy Miss Valentine was hiding. "You seem to have picked up a stray. Whoever could this be? Step forward young man."

Steven made his way to the front and put out his hand. "Good morning! My name is Steven Universe! I guess you must be Mr. 3!"

"HOW DID YOU KNOW THAT?!" he demanded, looking quite fearful.

The boy pointed to his hair. "Your hair silly!"

"Silly?" Do you have any idea with whom you are talking to?" Mr. 3's voice turned venomous.

He nodded. "Mr. 3!"

The slumbering form of the girl made a small chuckle before returning to snoring. Steven pointed to her and whispered. "Who is that?"

"Miss Goldenweek, my partner. Ignore her, she clearly doesn't want to be disturbed, no matter how inopportune a time it may be," he shook his head and then narrowed his eyes. "You ask a lot of questions little boy. Allow me to ask you one: why are you here in my house?"

"I'm working with Miss Valentine and Mr. 5 to save a princess!" Steven smiled.

The candle man's eyebrow raised as he looked to his fellow Agents. "Save?" He distinctly said 'save.' Very interesting development...very interesting indeed." Mr. 3 began to chuckle. "And, pray tell, how did you end up with such a weak pair of individuals?"

"What did you say?!" Mr. 5 angrily stepped forward.

"How were we supposed to know about the Straw Hat pirates?!" Miss Valentine defended herself.

"HEY!" Steven interjected. "That's not nice at all!"

"Well I can be a 'not nice' person sometimes, brat, especially when I have to clean up the mistakes of others."

"Apologize!" he demanded.

The jaws of the "Mr. 5 Pair" dropped and Miss Goldenweek decided to take the moment to wake up. All eyes were on the two of them as Steven stood his ground.

Mr. 3 stood up and sized the boy up. "Boy, I would watch your tone. You have no idea what I am capable of nor do you know anything about the people you are following around like a dog on a leash!"

"I know enough that you shouldn't talk to them like that! That's not nice! I don't care who you are, but you WILL apologize!"

"I am not typically spoken to like that..." Mr. 3 started before laughing. "But I must say I am no doubt impressed. I see you are braver than I first gave you credit for. Bravo, Mr. Universe. Miss Valentine, Mr. 5, I do apologize for my flippant remarks, but I have a point. You allowed the pirates and the princess to escape to this very island. However, it seems to have worked out for the best."

The man whipped out two pieces of paper and handed them over to the trio. "These are the wanted posters for Dorry and Brogy, two giants from the Giant Warrior Pirates with incredibly high bounties. By the good nature of fate, we have been blessed to find their hiding spot. As such, the combined amount of berries we would receive as the bounty is enough to cause even Mr. 0 to ignore the momentary lax of judgement about...'saving' Princess Vivi. Is there any reason to argue with that logic?"

As Miss Valentine and Mr. 5 stared intently at the wanted posters, Steven started to chuckle. "You guys are super weird! Hahaha!"

Mr. 3's eyebrow distinctly twitched. "You are trying my patience, child. What is that supposed to mean?"

"You get paid in fruit! Is that your money?"

Miss Valentine and Mr. 5 hid their faces behind their hands while the girl in the corner let out a light chuckle. "Where did you say you

picked up this child, Mr. 5?"

"He fell from the sky. He claims to be from a parallel dimension or some crap," Mr. 5 crossed his arms while shaking his head. "Things are a bit different where he came from."

"'Parallel dimension' you say?" Mr. 3 rubbed the bottom of his jaw. "I think this is something we should look into. Regardless, we need to step up our timetable. I shall accompany you two as we incapacitate the giants. As for you...Miss Goldenweek, keep our guest company."

"Do I have to?" she groaned. "That seems like a lot of work."

"Would you rather join us and claim the bounties? We could use that painting skill of yours..."

"On second thought, this is fine," she said in a dull voice.

However, Steven stamped his foot. "Why can't I come? I can be useful."

"Mr. Universe," Mr. 3 adjusted his glasses. "I have already concocted a plan that involves only the three of us with Miss Goldenweek here as a wild card. Be thankful I'm being so generous as to let you roam around at all. If there are no further objections, I would like to make a small fortune."

With that, he got up to leave. "Mr. 5. Miss Valentine. Let's go."

The blonde female and the dark-haired gentleman gave Steven a look of sadness. It seems that even Mr. 5 was touched by the way that Steven stood up for them. "Steven..."

"We'll be fine," Steven said with a forced smile. "Go stop those pirates!"

"We will," Miss Valentine said as she bit her lower lip.

\*AGITR\*

"I want an explanation for this," Mr. 3 demanded when they were far enough away from the house. "You bring a small child who claims to

be from a parallel dimension into my house during a Baroque Works mission?! What were you two even thinking?!"

"Steven doesn't know a single person in the world! He doesn't even know where he is!" Miss Valentine argued.

"Good. Then no one will miss him," Mr. 3 stated.

"Excuse me?!"

The candle man shot her a look. "You would do well to remember you are below me in rank. That makes me your superior. I will let Miss Goldenweek decide if there is any value to the boy but Baroque Works needs results, not hindrances! This situation **WILL** be handled by the end of the day. Do I make myself clear?!"

The two other Agents gave each other a grim look. It was clear Miss Valentine was incredibly conflicted and fearful of Mr. 3. As such, it fell to Mr. 5 to give the appropriate response.

"It won't be a problem."

# **The Painter And The Half-Gem**

In the heart of Little Garden, the "Mr. 5 Pair" had managed to find and subdue half of the pirates rather easily. After using Mr. 5's Devil Fruit powers to spike one of the giant's barrels of grog, Mr. 3 sent the two to find Princess Vivi, the young princess of the Alabasta kingdom. They had worried that they would have to deal with the Straw Hat pirate's Devil Fruit abilities, but he was presently lodged under a rock and unable to move.

Things seemed to be looking up for Mr. 5 and Miss Valentine.

"It is fortuitous that you seem to be incapacitated, Straw Hat. You are the only one on this damn island we consider a threat. We had planned to lure the princess away from you using her duck, but this worked out so much better for us," Mr. 5 taunted moving closer to his target.

"Consider yourself lucky, duck! Kyahahaha!" Miss Valentine laughed.

In actuality, the two had been close to forcing the duck to do it by force regardless, but Miss Valentine insisted on checking in on Steven with only minimal complaining by Mr. 5. It was only on their way back to the wax house did they spy the Straw Hat pirate, his long-nosed friend, the princess, and her duck.

"It was you, wasn't it?!" the long-nosed pirate growled. "You interrupted the giants' noble duel, didn't you?!"

Mr. 5 merely smirked. "Just following orders from Mr. 3...just like taking you alive right now, Princess Vivi."

"Mr. 3 is here?!" the princess cried. "Then that means Miss Goldenweek is here too!"

"How perceptive," Miss Valentine rolled her eyes. Of course, the mere mention of her name caused the woman to worry. Was Steven in danger with that powerful painter? But the Straw Hat pirate dragged her back to reality.

"YOU ASSHOLES STOPPED THE GIANTS' FIGHT! I'M GOING TO KICK YOUR ASS!"

She forced herself to put Steven out of her thoughts. 'I just hope that Miss Goldenweek isn't secretly as cruel as Mr. 3 is...for Steven's sake...'

\*AGITR\*

"Now that's just cruel!" Steven cried out. "You can't do that!"

"I can do what I want. I got put in charge," Miss Goldenweek told him. "Now, are you going to listen or not?"

"But I want to see how it's looking!"

Miss Goldenweek put down her paint brush and easel and gave the boy a look. "It's not done yet. I don't like showing off unfinished work."

"Ugh!" Steven sighed and slumped down. "Can you at least TELL me what you are painting?"

"A banana gator swimming beside a ship," she said between strokes.

Steven started to chuckle. "A banana gator? Really?! That sounds hilarious! Are they bananas shaped like an alligator or alligators shaped like bananas?"

"You're odd."

"You're weird!" Steven retorted.

Miss Goldenweek sighed and looked at her painting. "I don't want to paint this anymore."

"Then can I see it?!"

"No. I might want to finish it later," she said as she put aside the canvas. In its place she grabbed another one. "Now I don't know what to paint."

Steven blinked a few times and scratched his head. "But...but..."

The girl, taking great energy to do so, got up and moved over to a small box in the corner. "Do you want a rice cracker? I do."

"Sure! Want to eat outside? It's so nice and I'm tired of being cooped up in this small house," Steven suggested as he accepted the cracker.

"I don't see why not. Grab that blanket. We can put it down and have a picnic."

"Picnic!" Steven said excitedly.

The two sat down outside and stared out at the trees. Steven felt relaxed here for the moment, with the memory of the Rifting Stone's failure fading away.

"Mr. 3 doesn't believe you are from another dimension, you know," she said. "That's why he wanted me to be with you."

"The 'three' guy? I don't really like him," he admitted. "He was very rude to Miss Valentine and Mr. 5."

"He gets like that."

"Why is he so mean? Why was he putting them down?"

She shrugged. "He's got a superiority complex." When she saw the confused look on his face, she reworded it. "He thinks he's better than everyone."

"Ah." Steven nodded. "Why do you hang out with him then?"

"Because we are the two artists of Baroque Works."

"Is Baroque Works your secret club?" Steven pried.

Miss Goldenweek put down her rice cracker and cocked her head. "You mean you've been traveling with Miss Valentine and Mr. 5 and you don't know anything?"



"Well I did kinda fall out of the sky yesterday...or was it two days ago? I really don't know," Steven lightly laughed. Then his eyes grew wide. "Wait, are you going to tell me about your club and what you guys do? All I know is that you catch pirates!"

"No."

Steven batted his eyebrows. "Please?"

"No."

"Pretty please?"

"No."

The half-Gem hung his head in defeat. "Aww."

Suddenly, a loud rumble was heard all around them. Steven started to panic and looked around in every direction. "Ahh! An earthquake! What is that?!"

"It's just a dinosaur," she said, pointing to an oncoming beast. It was charging with all of its might at the two.

"How can you be so calm?!" Steven asked.

She went to pick up her paint brush, but then looked around the blanket. "Oh no. I seem to have left my brush inside. That's not good."

"What does that have to do with anything?!" Steven yelled. "Brace yourself!"

The young painter closed her eyes, waiting for the dinosaur to strike when she heard an odd sound. She opened her eyes to see a most majestic sight:

Steven wielding a pink shield against the enemy dinosaur.

"...I think I know what to paint."

\*AGITR\*

After the excitement of the picnic, Miss Goldenweek asked Steven to pose with his shield out. When he found himself in a pose that was acceptable to her standards, the girl started painting.

"What Devil Fruit did you eat? The Shield Shield Fruit?" she asked while she made pink paint on her palette.

"I didn't eat one! We don't have Devil Fruits in my world," Steven informed her while trying not to move. "It's actually from my gem. Want to see it?"

"Will it require you to move?" Miss Goldenweek asked.

"...yes?" Steven said hopefully.

"Then no."

"Aww," he pouted.

"So, does everyone where you come from have those 'gems'?" the young painter asked as she compared the pink hues of the shield to her palette.

"Nope! The only people who have them are me and the Gems. They are magical aliens from the Gem Homeworld!" Steven smiled, thinking about his family back home.

"So you're an alien."

"What?"

"You said Gems are aliens. You have a gem..."

"No!" Steven laughed. "I'm only half-Gem! My mom was a Gem while my dad is just an ordinary earthling!"

The painted nodded. "Oh."

After about an hour of painting (and squirming around in Steven's case) Miss Goldenweek finally reached a conclusion. "I believe you."

"What?" Steven asked carefully, trying not to move again. He didn't

want to make her angry.

"I believe you are from a parallel dimension."

"Oh," Steven blinked. "Good?"

"You're an interesting person, Steven Universe," she nodded. "But you make a good model. Want to see the final product?"

"Really?!" Steven said excitedly. "Does that mean I can move?"

She nodded slightly and the boy caused his shield to disappear as he jumped in the air. "Yay!"

The painting was so lifelike. In such a short amount of time, the girl was able to replicate every single detail on Steven's body and shield. It was incredible. The young Gem couldn't believe that this was made in front of his eyes. "It's beautiful!" he whispered.

"I'm glad you approve."

"Is that why you came to Little Garden?" Steven asked. "You came here to paint?"

"No. We came here to kidnap the princess and kill the Straw Hat pirates," she said while admiring her work.

"Oh yeah," Steven nodded. After a second, his eyes widened in shock. "Wait, back that up. What did you say?"

"That we were going to kidnap the princess and kill the pirates."

Steven felt like his inside was going to burst. "Wait...kill?!"

"That's what I said."

"You've...you've killed people before?" Steven backed away nervously.

She shrugged. "Not me, but Mr. 3 has. Miss Valentine and Mr. 5 too."

"What?!" Steven started to sweat. "But they are so nice!" His mind

started to race. Surely there was some way to justify this horrible truth? "Wait, it was just pirates right? Bad guys trying to hurt people?"

"Just the people Mr. 0 tells them to kill," she said nonchalantly.

It was at this moment that the gravity of Steven's situation hit home. The people who he thought were good people were actually killers...but he couldn't accept that they were truly mean. After all, they were so nice to him! He had been taught that killing was something only bad people did, but they helped him and worried about him!

What was he going to do?

"Why does your boss want you to kill people?!"

"So we can have a country all of our own where all of our dreams can come true," she told him.

Steven couldn't believe what she was saying. "But to get that by hurting people is wrong! You can't just go around hurting people!"

Miss Goldenweek said nothing at the comment and didn't change the expression on her face. Fear swelled up inside Steven when he realized something. "Were...were you going to kill me?"

"Mr. 3 probably wanted to, but I don't think Miss Valentine and Mr. 5 would have been happy about it."

"Gah!" Steven backed away. "Do...do YOU want to kill me?"

She shook her head. "No. You're nice."

"So if I wasn't nice, you'd want to kill me?" Steven stared at her intently.

Miss Goldenweek looked to the floor at her feet. "I don't know...probably not..."

"Do you like killing?" Steven continued.

The girl's face flushed red. "No...but Mr. O...utopia..."

The dark-haired boy slammed his arm into the wax wall cracking it. Miss Goldenweek let out a small gasp. "Why do you listen to him?! Is your utopia really going to matter if you got it through violence and death?! You are better than that!"

"You just met me."

Steven looked her in the eye and forced his face to soften. "Miss Goldenweek, Pearl told me that when my mom gave up her physical form to bring me into the world, I inherited her love for everything and everyone. If you want a better world, make it your own way! The world could use good painters like you."

The little girl brought her hands to her cheeks and felt the burning on them. It was clear she was embarrassed. "I...I..."

"That's your dream, right? To be a painter?"

"The best in all of the Grand Line," she replied in a small voice. "The best in the world."

"Well, do you think you can do that by forcing it to happen? That doesn't seem fair."

Miss Goldenweek was now clearly conflicted. Who was this boy to tell her what was right and what was wrong? However, she was only ever really interested in her other teammates, who she really cared about. If they were all happy, then she would be too and if she were happy, her paintings would be perfect.

"What can I do?"

"Well for starters," a new voice spoke out. "You could pour me a cup of tea. A guy gets parched in the jungle."

The two children looked from each other to the direction of the new voice. A blond-haired man had entered the wax house at some point and had been listening in. He took a deep breath of his cigarette and exhaled.

"Ahhhhhhhh!" Steven and Miss Goldenweek screamed loudly.

Now Steven was terrified. It was bad enough to deal with the revelations of Miss Goldenweek but now a man who was probably a pirate had broken in and was probably out to kill him too.

'Why is this happening to me?!

# The Unexpected Phone Call

The blond-haired man eyed the children curiously. Clearly their screaming and backing away wasn't the kind of reaction he was expecting. "Woah! Hold on, kids! I'm not going to hurt you...unless you give me a reason to."

He dropped the cigarette butt on the floor and stepped on it. He moved toward them and Miss Goldenweek instinctively held her brush close. Her eyes darted to the discarded palette on the ground. The man noticed this and picked it up.

"A painter, eh? So what does Baroque Works need with a painter?" he asked as he flashed her a grim look. "You are part of Baroque Works, am I right? I overheard your conversation so don't try to deny it."

The girl quivered in fear. Though equally as scared, Steven stepped forward and put his arms out. "Don't hurt her! I don't think she's a bad guy!"

"So I've heard. Do you know what Baroque Works has been trying to do to my Vivi-chan?" his eyes narrowed. "They've been trying to kill her and to take over her country. Now you tell me, does that seem like something a good guy would do?"

The painter's eyes shut tight in fear. Without her paints, she was practically useless. The pirate and Steven had a point: what good was being the best painter in the world if you killed your competition?

"No, but that's on that Mr. 0 guy, not her. She was told that she was making a place for all of her friends to make their dreams come true. That's what she wants and probably what the others want too...except that Mr. 3 guy. I don't think he's really nice," Steven stood his ground.

"Dreams, eh?" the man laughed. "You sound like my idiot captain. I take it you're not some kind of hostage or something then?"

Steven shook his head. "Nope! I'm her friend!"

"What?!" she whispered.

"We're friends, right?" Steven turned to look at her. "You said I was nice and didn't want to kill me. That means we are friends!"

"Jeez, are you sure you aren't my captain?" the man shook his head. He stared outside and looked at the tea cups that were still out. "Look, afternoon is the best time to drink Earl Grey, which I see you have over there. I'd personally kill for a cup. Do you mind, little Baroque Works girl?"

She shook her head, still in shock over the situation.

"Is tea the only thing people drink around here?" Steven asked to nobody in particular.

The man sat down and took a sip. "Ah! So why don't we chat a bit and get to know each other before I go to presumably save my crew...and make Nami-san and Vivi-chan love me!"

"But...but we don't even know you!" Steven protested.

"Call me Sanji, kid. Now tell me your story...and then maybe I'll give back your paint."

\*AGITR\*

"So those shitheads who attacked us in Whiskey Peak are here too?," Sanji said, standing up, taking in everything from Steven and Miss Goldenweek's story and choosing to acknowledge the important information. "You picked a hell of a boat to land on, kid."

"I didn't really have a choice!" Steven defended himself. "And don't call them that word! Cursing isn't nice!"

The pirate chuckled. "That's cute. The question, though, is this: what the hell do we do now?" Sanji got up and adjusted his tie. "See, your friends are trying to kill my nakama. That doesn't necessarily put us on the same side here."



"I'm telling you, there has to be more to it than that!" Steven argued. "People don't just do bad things without a reason!"

"I already told you, Steven," Miss Goldenweek said dejectedly. "We are doing it for selfish reasons...without thinking of the people of Alabasta. The pirate is right. We aren't good people."

"I'm glad we could all come to this exciting conclusion," Sanji said sarcastically. "If you'll excuse me, I'm going to go kick your friends' asses to save a damsel in distress."

As he left for the door an odd sound was heard. It was coming from a discarded picnic basket on the ground. Miss Goldenweek put her hand to her mouth. "It's him!"

"Who?" Sanji asked. "Your shitty partner?"

"No," she told him as all color drained from the painter's face. "The boss."

Steven went to the picnic basket and pulled out a snail with a phone on it. "What IS this thing? A snail phone?"

"A Den Den Mushi," Sanji lit another cigarette. "So, what does that shitty Crocodile want now?"

"Crocodile?!" Miss Goldenweek was shocked. "You mean the Shichibukai?! He's the boss?!"

"The what?" Steven asked, but was ignored.

The pirate nodded. "That's the big secret my Vivi-chan knows and why she's been marked for death."

"So he's responsible for Miss Valentine and Mr. 5 killing people?" Steven asked with a serious tone in his voice.

"Yes," the girl responded meekly. "We are probably late for our report." She looked in Steven's eyes and saw something that she had yet to see in him: anger. It was clear that this boy was so mad at this unseen presence that caused so much pain to this world; a world that wasn't even his own.

She knew he was going to do something stupid. As such, she took the choice away from him. She went over to him and grabbed the Den Den Mushi away from him. "What are you...?!"

"Hello, Mr. 0. Miss Goldenweek reporting," she spoke into the mouthpiece, using all of her energy to keep her voice steady.

"Miss Goldenweek," a deep voice responded. "I'm surprised. Mr. 3 usually files the report. Has there been a complication?"

The girl shifted her eyes to Steven and Sanji, which she motioned to stay quiet. "No sir. We have met up with the 'Mr. 5 Pair' and together have incapacitated the Straw Hat pirates and the Princess Vivi. Mr. 3 is just raiding their ship. I didn't want to join. It was too much work."

Sanji's eyebrow raised up in surprise. Steven look confused but assumed this was a good thing.

"I see. I am pleased, Miss Goldenweek. The Unluckies have been dispatched to verify the completion of your assignment and to give you an Eternal Pose to Alabasta. They should be there any second now."

The girl's eyes darted around the room in fear. She looked from window to window without saying a word.

"How adorable! An otter and vulture wearing sunglasses!" Steven whispered.

Sure enough, Steven had indeed noticed two new additions to the room. The small animals did not speak a single word, but pulled out a pair of guns and two clam shells with knives at the ends.

"No! Mr. 13! Miss Friday! They are with us! I'll bring you to Mr. 3!" Miss Goldenweek shook her arms. The two animals looked at each other and put away their weapons. The girl then picked up the phone and continued to talk to her boss. "The Unluckies have arrived. I am showing them the others now sir."

"Very good. But tell me..." the voice paused. "Who else is with you?"

"What?!" Miss Goldenweek gulped. "Um..."

Steven motioned to the painter to hand him the Den Den Mushi. Reluctantly, she handed it over and held her breath. "So you're the boss! It is an honor to..." Steven began with a falsely cheery yet deep voice.

"Cut the crap and tell me your name and what is going on!" the voice growled.

The boy started to sweat a bit before snapping his fingers. "They call me the Tiger Millionaire! I'm the best at what I do!"

"Are you now?" the voice asked. "What exactly do you 'do' and how did you come to be with my people?"

It was clear that Steven didn't think this through, but he quickly fell back on the one thing he did know: television and movie stereotypes. "Just a bounty hunter from the Outer Rim Territories. My partner...uh...", Steven winked at Sanji, who shook his head with disapproval. "Obi-Wan Kenobi... and I were saved by Mr. 5 and we owed him a favor, no questions asked."

"I see. And what did they tell you about this 'favor?'"

"Something about a princess and a pirate. I was just happy to be alive and not dead. Like those Straw Hat people! Who are dead!" Though the tone of his voice fluctuated a bit, Steven managed to keep the same, fake voice throughout the talk.

The voice of Mr. 0 grew silent for a moment. The Unluckies waited to hear their boss' verdict about the situation, Miss Goldenweek held her breath, Steven started shaking, and Sanji just tried to think what the hell a "Kenobi" was.

"You have a good work ethic. It has kept you alive today. Inform Miss Goldenweek to follow the Eternal Pose and to head straight there immediately. I will contact her on the usual channels." With that, Mr. 0 hung up.

Steven sighed in relief and slunk to the floor. "I did it!" He turned to the other two people. "That was scary!"

Just as the boy turned, the form of the otter flew into the wall. Steven's jaw dropped as he saw Sanji kick the vulture into submission. He bent down and pulled a small object off of the limp body of the beast. It appeared to be a compass that could strap onto a wrist.

"Ahh! Scary Sanji!" Steven screamed.

"He did the right thing," Miss Goldenweek told him. "They would have tried to kill us the second they found out the truth."

The boy went down and poked the form of the otter. "You didn't have to kill them!"

"They aren't dead, just knocked out." Miss Goldenweek walked right over to Sanji and held out her hand. "May I please have my palette back? We may need it to stop Mr. 3."

Sanji took a deep breath as he stared at the paint on the palette. Finally he relented. "Lead the way little girl."

"I'm almost fifteen you know!" she said defensively.

"You're older than me?!" Steven said shocked.

\*AGITR\*

As they made their way out of the house and into the jungle, Miss Goldenweek took the lead, but hung her head in shame. After a while of silence, she finally spoke up. "I know it can't make up for what we've done, but the boss shouldn't be looking for you anymore."

"The hell are you talking about?" Sanji asked dismissively.

"The bo...Crocodile thinks you are dead, so the princess should be able to get back home without Baroque Works trying to kill her," she tried to explain it.

"Not that part!" the man shook his head. "The part about making it up to us."

She turned her head back as they kept moving forward. "I...I don't understand."

"You don't have to make anything up to us, kiddo. You might have just put yourself on Baroque Works hit list. Did you even think about that?"

The girl nodded. Steven gasped at the thought of it. "That means that you are willing to...to..." The boy started to tear up a bit and couldn't get the words out.

"It doesn't matter," Miss Goldenwek gripped her paint brush tightly. "I need to start making amends for all of this. If it means finally fighting and doing work, then I will. If I can do that...then maybe I could deserve the title of 'Greatest Painter in the World.'"

Sanji took a deep drag of his cigarette and let out a single chuckle. "Huh. Well what do you know kid?"

"Hmm?" Steven had no idea what Sanji was referring to.

"Guess you were right. The painter here isn't as bad as the rest of her shitty friends."

"I told you!" Steven smiled. "I knew you were a good person! Hear that, Miss Goldenweek?"

"Genevieve," she whispered.

"What?" Steven asked confused. Then realization dawned upon him. "Wait...is that your...?"

She nodded. "I don't want to be Miss Goldenweek anymore. It's not fun...or right."

The half-Gem jumped up in the air excitedly. "I know your name now! Yay!"

"Stop it!" the girl pointed her brush at him playfully angrily. "You are embarrassing me!"

"Genevieve! Genevieve!" Steven kept shouting her name. The boy

was clearly happy to know that she wasn't as evil as everyone thought she was.

"I have a paint brush and I know how to use it!"

"Whatcha gonna do?" Steven taunted. "Get my shirt dirty?"

"Don't tempt me!"

"Well, not to interrupt your fun, kids," Sanji started to smell the air.

"But unless someone is making a camp fire, I think we might be close to your old shitty partner."

The smile that was on Genevieve's face fell. "Oh no...it is the Candle Service Set! Your friends are in danger."

"No shit," Sanji grinned. "That's where we come in. Come on; let's kick your partner's ass!"

"Do we have to fight, guys?" Steven asked innocently. "Can't we just talk it out?"

"No!" his two other companions told him in unison.

"Aw!" The young Gem allowed his mind to wander as they ran toward the smell of smoke and burning wax. 'If I was right about Genevieve, then maybe I'm right about Mr. 5 and Miss Valentine!' he thought optimistically. 'I know I'm right! I have to be!'

# The Candle Service Set

Running as fast as they could, which was quite a feat for Genevieve as she preferred to take things slow and easy, the trio of people still had not reached the Baroque Works Agents that were targeting the princess. Sanji did his part to clear the path by kicking away any stray dinosaur that they came across. Bringing up the rear was Steven, who clutched onto the straps of his Cheeseburger Backpack with his life.

In the distance, a giant figure revealed itself. Looking similar to a giant birthday cake, Steven could make out three figures on top. "Birthday candles?"

"Mr. 3 ate the Wax Wax Fruit. He's created the Candle Service Set," Genevieve explained.

"Thanks for that insightful exposition, kid. Think you can tell us what that thing is?" the pirate asked impatiently.

"I just did."

Sanji ground his teeth in irritation. "But what does it do?!"

"Oh. It basically turns its victims into permanent wax sculptures," she elaborated. "I typically would paint them."

"Permanent...how can you say that so calmly?!" Steven yelled incredulously.

"Hey, give me a break! This has been my life for the past few years. I'm kind of used to this."

"Less talking, more running! Damn it! If that is Nami-san or Vivi-chan I'm gonna ram my foot so far up that shithead's ass that..."

"Ahh! Too much bad language!" Steven covered his ears.

"So Miss Go...Genevieve, what exactly do we need to do in this kind of situation?" Sanji asked, preparing to relight his cigarette.

The girl stopped and looked at the now glowing stick of tobacco and pointed to it. "We need that."

"But my dad says smoking is terrible for you! His friend Marty smoked sometimes and now he's dead to him!" Steven pointed out.

The two just looked at the kid and shook their heads. "Trust me. We'll need that and your lighter...oh. I'm going to paint on your shirt too."

"Wait...what?!" Sanji said, trying to read the girl's intentions. Before he could, the girl pulled out her brush and got to work.

"Genevieve, what are you doing?!" Steven asked.

"My work as Miss Goldenweek," she told him calmly. Flicking her brush onto Sanji, a painted symbol now adorned his suit. **"Color Trap!"**

\*AGITR\*

"Hahahaha! Truly this is my greatest masterpiece yet!" Mr. 3 yelled to his fellow Agents. "What are your thoughts, Mr. 5? Miss Valentine?"

The giant wax sculpture truly gave off the impression of a giant birthday cake. There were multiple layers of wax that culminated with a single giant pillar in the middle. On top of the pillar was a smiling circular dish with burning candles on it. The dish was then circling around, spreading bits of wax all throughout the air.

Unfortunately for the Straw Hat pirates, three of their numbers were forced into the layer next to the pillar with no way of escaping. There was an orange-haired teenager wearing a long sleeved shirt and a miniskirt, a blue-haired teenager with a green button up shirt, and a green-haired young man with a sash holding up a sword. Though they were not completely enveloped in wax yet, they found themselves unable to move.

Near them was another form covered in wax: one of the giant warriors Mr. 3 hoped to collect the bounty on. Beside him was the battered forms of the people the "Mr. 5 Pair" dealt with before: the



long-nosed pirate, the duck, and Straw Hat Luffy.

"Seems like a bit much for a simple mission," Mr. 5 admitted. "Just get it over with already. You have the girl..."

"Tisk tisk, Mr. 5. I expected more from you," the sculptor wagged his finger. "Do you not see it at all? This is not just purely a perfect piece of physical art. That goes without saying."

The man smirked at the Straw Hat pirate and moved toward him. "No, this goes much deeper than that. This will be the slow, agonizing ruination of a noble spirit who got in the way. You shouldn't have crossed Baroque Works, Straw Hat Luffy...your friends will die due to your choices..."

Before the pirate could react, the candle man was ready. "**Candle Lock!**" Mr. 3 yelled, sending a ball of wax flying toward the youthful pirate. It surrounded his legs and bound them together.

"My feet! You've turned them into a hammer!" the pirate smirked.

Though annoyed, Mr. 3 was not ready to quit. "That's not all I can do. After I bind your hands I will force you to watch your friends and your charge die in front of your very eyes. Then I'll burn your ship for good measure. It is only then, when your soul is crushed beyond repair, that I will be generous enough to end your bothersome life."

"Luffy!" the orange-haired girl yelled. "You can do this! You've still got your hands! Destroy the pillar before we get stuck as wax statues forever!"

"What?!" Luffy's jaw literally dropped. "Is that what's happening?!"

Mr. 3 shook his head and looked to the others. "This idiot is the one who gave you such an issue before? You really are weak, aren't you?"

The two were about to say something before a voice called out from the side of the forest clearing. "Hey! I told you not to make fun of them!"

Mr. 3 frowned as the familiar forms of Steven Universe and Miss

Goldenweek made themselves known. However, he could not hide the surprise of seeing a new face: no doubt a member of the Straw Hat's crew that he missed.

"Steven?!" Miss Valentine yelled out to him. "What are you doing here?!"

"SANJI!" Luffy roared. "What are you doing?!"

"Miss Goldenweek asked me to come here. I'm just doing what my friend asked me to do," Sanji cheerfully responded.

She pointed her paint brush towards the giant wax sculpture. "Go sit over there underneath the Candle Service Set. Don't move no matter what and do what I asked you to do."

"Anything for you!"

As the man moved past the Baroque Works Agents, they all realized what was going on. "My, my. Friendship Yellow-Green. Good choice, Miss Goldenweek."

"More members of Baroque Works, Vivi?!" the green-haired swordsman called over to the blue-haired princess.

"That's the second half of the 'Mr. 3 Pair:' Miss Goldenweek," Princess Vivi explained worryingly. Her eyes landed on the younger boy. "But I've never seen him before."

"Hello!" the boy waved. "I'm Steven!"

"Oh! Hi! I'm Luffy!" he waved back.

"DON'T GREET THE ENEMY!" everyone shouted at once, save Miss Goldenweek, who couldn't be bothered; Sanji, who wasn't told to; and the duck, because it was a duck.

"Mister Universe, this is a surprise!" Mr. 3 narrowed his eyes. "I thought you were staying back at the house?"

The boy pointed to Miss Goldenweek. "But she told me to follow her after we found the pirate guy and talked on the snail thing."

"What?!" Mr. 3 snapped. "Mr. 0 called?!"

"Yeah," Miss Goldenweek ate a rice cracker that she brought along with her. "Crocodile wanted to know the status of our mission, so I told him we killed them."

The man nodded, looking relieved. "A bit premature, but assured nevertheless." After a moment, he relayed exactly what she said back to him. "WAIT, DID YOU SAY CROCODILE?! AS IN *THE* CROCODILE?!"

Princess Vivi darted her eyes around. "What?! She knows Crocodile's identity?! How did that happen?!"

"A Shichibukai is our boss?!" Miss Valentine nearly passed out to the floor.

"Miss Goldenweek, how did you come about this knowledge?!" Mr. 3 demanded of her.

The painter pointed to Sanji, who was fiddling with something at the base of the Service Set. "He told me. It's the boss' secret," she shrugged. "Thought you should know."

"NO, MISS GOLDENWEEK! I DIDN'T WANT TO KNOW THAT! HE'LL KILL US IF HE KNOWS THAT WE KNOW!" Mr. 3 panicked.

"Wait!" the long-nosed pirate bunched forward somewhat comically. "If you know that, then maybe we don't need to fight anymore! Let Brogy be and we can end this!"

The candle man let out a cold laugh. "Are you joking? This just means I have to kill you all faster before the boss realizes anything! I have no problem keeping that a secret...but clearly you all do!"

The long-nosed pirate inched back a few steps. Mr. 3 pointed to him. "Redeem yourself, you two. Kill him and the duck."

"Quack?!"

"Gah!"

Miss Valentine looked remorsefully to Steven but none the less jumped in the air. The long-nosed pirate started to scream while Luffy just watched.

"What is he doing?!" the princess asked incredulously. "Why isn't he trying to save us?"

"He's watching to see how this will turn out," the swordsman said. "As am I."

"How can you say that, Zoro?! We can't even move and you are talking about waiting it out?!" the other girl yelled. "What is wrong with you?!"

"Just watch, Nami. There's something going on here..."

High up in the air, the blonde-haired woman bit her lip. 'I'm sorry that you have to see this, Steven, but I'm not about to risk my dream,' she thought to herself. **"10,000 Kilo Guillotine!"**

Miss Valentine plummeted down toward the pirate, who tried to run but was blocked by Mr. 5. Again, Luffy did nothing to help his friend, but just watched.

"USOPP!" the princess and Nami yelled.

"No!" Steven interjected. "Don't hurt him!" With a shining burst of light, Steven's gem produced his pink shield and protected the cowering pirate. Miss Valentine continued her descent and landed squarely on the defensive Gem weapon. The look on her face was one of horror.

"My, this just got interesting," Mr. 3 muttered.

"COOL!" Luffy and Usopp yelled at once.

Miss Valentine just shook her head incredulously. "Steven?! Why..."

"This isn't you, Miss Valentine! You might have done bad things before, but you don't have to now! Just stop it, if not for them then for me!" Steven implored.

She jumped off of his shield and landed on the ground. It was clear she was hurtful and conflicted right now. "I NEED to do this, Steven! You don't get it! A perfect country all to ourselves..."

"But is that any way to live?" Steven looked into her eyes. "This fighting is stupid! In the end, nobody will be happy."

"You can't possibly..."

"But I can!" Steven started to tear up again. "My friend Lapis was imprisoned in a mirror for years because her gem was cracked and when she got out, she did some bad things too. She attacked me and the Gems, broke my dad's leg, and tried to steal the ocean."

Steven looked now not only to Miss Valentine but to Usopp and Mr. 5. "Lapis was willing to do anything to get back to Homeworld and didn't think about what she was doing. I helped her get better and in the end she made it back home...but when she got there it was miserable," the tears started to turn to legitimate crying now.

"Now's she's stuck fused at the bottom of our ocean with Jasper and there's nothing I can do to help her, especially when I'm stuck here in this world!"

Steven walked over to Mr. 3 and looked him straight in the eyes. "You've already won, but at what cost? Is this perfect country of yours going to be what you wanted if you have to keep hurting everyone around you? Just stop! Please!" Steven begged. Unfortunately, Mr. 3 was not amused.

"Oho? The puppy-dog is going to tell me what to do on my own mission?" Mr. 3 sauntered closer to the boy and turned his hand into wax. "The only reason you are alive was because of those weaklings. I could snuff you out right now and there wouldn't be a damn thing you could do about it. Do yourself a favor and shut your mouth before I shut it for you!"

"What is your problem?!" Steven stood his ground. "Why do you even want to do this? I don't know what a Shichibukai is, but I can tell that you all don't like it! Let it go!"

In one swift motion, the candle man grabbed Steven by the throat and raised him in the air. The boy's eyes widened as he started to choke. "Le...let go!"

"You talk too much," he replied venomously. "I'm doing your parallel dimension a favor by shutting you up! Miss Goldenweek, please assist me in incapacitating the Straw Hat before he tries to damage my masterpiece."

"You don't need to worry about the Straw Hat damaging it," she told him.

"Oh? And why is that?"

"Because it's on fire," she pointed to the giant wax creation. Mr. 3's eyes bulged out of his glasses in shock.

"HOW COULD THAT HAVE HAPPENED?!" he narrowed his eyes. "Miss Goldenweek, what did you do?!"

"I don't want to be Miss Goldenweek anymore. I just want to paint," she told him. "I want to be the best painter in the world!"

The fury etched on Mr. 3's face was legendary. He looked to his former partner and then to the choking boy in his hands. "I don't give a damn about what you want! You...telling us about Crocodile...it was a distraction for that pirate to burn down the Candle Service Set! My plans...this boy put you up to this, didn't he?!" He raised him even higher. "You don't deserve to die by my hands, but what the hell? I can make an exception for..."

**"Nose Fancy Cannon!"** a voice interjected. At once, Mr. 3 started to catch fire, letting Steven go, who now was gasping for air. The boy coughed as hard as he could when he finally saw his savior.

"Mr. 5! But..."

"Don't talk kid. Save your breath," he told him. The man adjusted his sunglasses and sent another explosive hurtling toward the Candle Service Set, spreading the fire to the rest of the wax.

Still burning intensely, Mr. 3 dropped to the ground and started to

roll around, trying to extinguish the flames. After a few moments, he did and discarded his ruined clothes. "Are you...are you insane, Mr. 5?!" Mr. 3 panted. "Do you have any idea...what I will do to you?! The price for betrayal is death you idiot! I..."

"The name...is Damian!" Mr. 5 kicked him in the jaw with all of his might, causing him to fly into the smoldering wreckage of his creation. By this point, the flames all but consumed it and the three companions of Luffy were able to move. As the pirates backed away from the defeated Mr. 3, Mr. 5 simply went back to picking his nose. "He talked too much. Damn hypocrite."

"That was so cliché," Miss Goldenweek pointed out.

"I don't care!" Steven weakly got up. "You told me your name!"

The former Mr. 5 folded his arms. "Don't let it get to your head."

"But why?" Steven coughed.

He looked away and started to walk to the giant fire. "I figured I owed you more than just letting you borrow my clothes. You saved my life so I saved yours. Now you owe me new clothes before we get you back home."

As he walked he passed by Miss Valentine, who was still in shock over what just happened. "Am I wrong on that, Miss Valentine...or should I call you Petrea?"

The usage of her real name snapped her out of it. "You knew my name?!"

"You talk in your sleep," he smirked and gave her a wink. The woman blushed furiously and then made her way to Steven. He waved to her, coughing a few more times.

"Your name is Petrea!" the Gem laughed. "That's a silly name!"

"And you still need manners in etiquette!" she punched him in the shoulder, which caused him to wince. "Oops."

"Ow!" Steven rubbed his arm. He then looked over to the former wax

weapon, which now melted into a flaming giant puddle. "Wait, is he...?"

"Dead? No, just knocked out. Mr. 3's too powerful to be taken down completely like that," Damian yelled to him. "Don't worry about it."

"Hey!" a voice yelled to them. Petrea found herself face to face with Usopp and Luffy. "Just because we know your name doesn't excuse what you two did! You tried to kill us and interrupted the giants' duel! What do you have to say to that?"

Petrea looked to Steven and shut her eyes. She put the boy behind her and hung her head. "I have nothing to say. Words can't change actions. Everything I did was to follow my dreams...dreams that I can see were never going to be achieved through Baroque Works..."

"Dreams?" Luffy asked.

"I...want to be a chocolatier!" she admitted. "Everyone always told me it was a stupid idea...that I'd never amount to anything. When Baroque Works told me about their utopia, how could I say no?"

Steven went wide-eyed. He tried to get up but stumbled. "You made that chocolate from yesterday!"

She nodded. "And you told me I was gifted."

Stars filled Steven's eyes. "You remembered!"

"Not that all of this isn't entertaining," Usopp interjected. "But the facts are facts! You still have red in your ledger, missy!"

"But that was that 'three' guy! He forced them to do it!" Steven protested. "You can't..."

"Steven, let me do this," she smiled weakly. "He's right. I have some terrible things...heinous things. I'm not the good person you thought I was."

"But now you can be!" Steven implored. "If you want to do it, then do it! You are a good person, you've only forgotten!"



The boy hobbled over to Luffy and Usopp and bowed. "Please forgive them!"

"Okay!" Luffy smiled.

"WHAT?! JUST LIKE THAT?! BUT THEY KILLED DORRY!" Usopp yelled.

"He's not dead," Damian called from the other side of the clearing. He had pulled out the four pirates from the flames, including Sanji, who had not been told to move. Mr. 3 was also among them, but immediately discarded and thrown to the side. "I gave him a weak blast. Unless the other giant was trying to kill him, he should be fine."

He walked over to the other giant, who was shaking off his own wax and stared him in the eye. "Look, I'm sorry for interrupting the duel. If there is anything..."

"You said Dorry isn't dead?" Brogy made out, coughing some wax out of his throat. "If that's the case, then we can continue our duel when he gets better...or you can give me the same grog and I'll be even with him!"

"You just nearly got turned into a ball of wax," Genevieve pointed out. "I think you'll be on equal footing."

The giant warrior blinked and then smiled. "I do believe you're right! Gabababababa!"

The giant used all of his energy to get up and went to seek out his friend. Genevieve smiled and then walked over to Sanji, whose clothes were mostly still intact. "Oops. You are still painted."

She rubbed the paint off of his back. The blond blinked and shook his head. "What the hell was that?"

"My Color Trap," she explained.

"...and what exactly is a Color Trap?"

"Hypnosis," she shrugged.

The pirate shook his head and grumbled until he got a look at the two women beside him. The one eye that was visible away from his hair turned into a heart. "NAMI-SAN! VIVI-CHAN! YOU BOTH LOOK SO BEAUTIFUL TODAY!"

Nami then knocked him on the back of the head. "You're hopeless!" she then joined the now full congregation of people. Steven was explaining everything that happened to him, and she let him talk. It was a very interesting story.

Steven smiled and tried to gesture to everyone. "And now everybody is okay! Nobody was turned to wax and the 'Mr. 5 Pair' is turning over a new leaf! That's a good ending in my book!"

"But what about my people?" Vivi asked. "Baroque Works is literally suffocating my country to make the utopia you all were promised!"

"Well, there is only one thing to do: I am going to help you!" Steven smiled.

"What?!" Petrea asked. "And go up against Crocodile?!"

"Good guys help people," Steven said sternly. "Since I can't get home yet, I want to help!"

The blue-haired princess shook her head. "You don't know the kind of people Baroque Works employs. Murderers, bounty hunters, assassins..."

The comments turned Steven's face a shade of red. "A...assassins! I..." he tried to put on a brave face. "It's what my mom would do. She fought for my planet, and now I'm going to fight for yours! Will you let me help you?"

Luffy thought about it for a second and nodded. "Sure...but what can you do? I'm looking for very specific people to join my crew."

"Uh...I can sing?" Steven shrugged hopefully.

"PERFECT! We need a musician!" he jumped for joy.

"But I don't have my instrument!"

"We will get you some! A musician is the most important member of my crew!"

The boy clapped his hands, but then he turned to the Baroque Works Agents, who were talking to each other in private. Finally, it was the former Mr. 5 that broke the ice.

"Well you won't be alone, kid," Damian put his hand on his shoulder. "You still owe me clothes. I guess that means I'm coming with you."

"Really?!" Steven said excitedly.

"If Straw Hat will let me."

"And me," Petrea smiled.

The boy looked to Genevieve, who shrugged. "Yeah. Okay. Me too."

Nami shook her head. "No! We can't trust all of you, especially after you tried to kill us! I don't care what you did today, you've been part of..."

"Fine with me! You all can come!" Luffy nodded, shaking Damian's hand.

"YOU ARE TOO TRUSTING!" Nami yelled. "And WHERE do you think you will get the money to pay for all the extra food that we will need or for the kid's instrument?!"

"I don't care how we do it! I'll cook for Petrea-chan for free!" Sanji coozied up close to her, who giggled. Damian's eye twitched but said nothing.

"Mr. 3 has a lot of treasure on his ship," Genevieve said calmly. "You can have it. I don't think he'll be needing while he is knocked out."

"TREASURE?!" Nami jumped up and down for joy.

"Just to be clear though," Damian made a face. "We are here to help the kid and to make up for the things we did under Crocodile. Don't think we are part of your pirate crew or anything."

"Shishishi! I understand!" Luffy smiled. "Well since we now have a new nakama and new friends, I think our musician should sing a song to put all of this behind us!"

Steven smiled and looked to his new crew mates, who sat down to listen, besides Zoro, Sanji, and Damian, who stood with their arms crossed. The boy started to tap his foot to find a rhythm, which was followed by Luffy and Usopp. As his new friends kept the time, Steven started to sing. *"Little Garden was a place where time was left behind. The dinosaurs who roamed the land were really very kind. But Mr. 3 did things that were really kind of mean. So Straw Hat Luffy saved the day and we all joined his team! We will travel the seas to try to save the day. Do not doubt the Straw Hat pirates, they will find a way! The princess will get home in one piece safe and sound! Crocodile won't stand a chance with all of us around!"*

After a second to make sure the short song was over, the various pirates, former bounty hunters, and royalty clapped their hands. As Luffy declared him to be his nakama no matter what, Steven couldn't help but think about his family back home. 'I'm going to help them fulfill their dreams...but I know my dream will come true. I know I'll be back home! Dad... Garnet... Pearl... Amethyst... Connie... Lion... I'll come back to you!' he told himself and rejoined the party that was about to begin. 'I just hope that they are all okay...'

# The Broken Promise

Inside the Crystal Temple, Pearl paced back and forth. It had been three agonizing days since Steven had vanished in the Strawberry Battlefield and the Gems had come no closer to figuring out what happened to him than when they started.

Both Garnet and Amethyst had used the Warp Pads to search for any leads that they could find. Pearl, who had returned ahead of the others, just waited. She had found nothing in the Sahara Desert and she crossed it off of the list of places they thought he might have gone.

Nobody had even suggested the worst possible outcome. If they did, Garnet would most likely attack them out of rage and regret.

The Warp Pad began to flash and Pearl ran over to it. "Please...please..." she quietly whispered. "Please be my Steven."

Unfortunately for the Gem, it was Garnet, who grumbled as she stepped off the device.

"You're here alone..." Garnet sighed angrily. "You didn't find him."

"No...no, I didn't," Pearl hung her head in sorrow. "I don't know what else we can do. When Amethyst comes back, we will have searched every desert on the planet!"

"We have to keep looking, maybe retrace our steps..." Garnet told her. "He HAS to be somewhere!"

"But are you sure it is a desert?" Pearl nudged. "Try using your Future Vision again. Maybe..."

"I already tried that! I told you before that every time I use Future Vision, I see Steven in either a snowy mountain or the desert. Sometimes he is hurt and other times he is with some local people. We've visited every mountain and now are combing every desert...and yet we STILL can't find him!" Garnet turned her hand into a giant gauntlet and punched the wall as hard as she could. "It

doesn't make sense!"

"Garnet, I..." Pearl started before the Warp Pad flowed once more.

A short figure stepped off of the landing platform and flashed a smile. It was wearing a familiar shirt, but rather than it being salmon colored, it was a shade of violet.

"I'm back!" the figure laughed. It then looked to both of the Gems and adopted a dejected look. "Aww...he's not here!"

The sight of an identical Steven caused Garnet to leave the room in anger. Pearl just shook her head and put her hands on her hips.

"Amethyst, why would you...what would possess you to think that shapeshifting into Steven would be a good idea?" Pearl shook her head.

The violet Steven reconfigured itself into the familiar form of Amethyst and slumped down on the floor. "I really thought he'd be here, Pearl..." Amethyst whispered. "I was so sure..."

Pearl bent down to comfort her fellow Gem. "I know, Amethyst. I thought he was coming back with you. But you can't change into Steven at a time like this! What if Greg or Connie were to see you? They wouldn't be able to take it. I mean..." Pearl broke down in tears. "I can't even take it!"

"We'll find him, Pearl," Amethyst forced a smile. "We know he's out there. We just haven't figure out where."

\*AGITR\*

Once the town had learned that Steven was missing, every member did their part to look for him. Flyers were spread everywhere by the local shop owners, the town DJ Sour Cream took on any job he could to scout the surrounding areas (which admittedly hasn't been a lot given the short time frame), and even Ronaldo Fryman made blogposts on his blog (KEEP BEACH CITY WEIRD!) to try to get the word out there.

The Gems, who typically made it a point to avoid local affairs, had

become semipublic figures of late. The three Gems made it a point to go around updating everyone about Steven. As such, this was declared to be one of the worst events to happen in the small city. So heinous was it that the Gems were asked to visit Mayor Dewey himself to get debriefed.

"So, Steven's....aunts...sisters?" the mayor asked, not entirely sure what to call them. "Have we had any luck with our missing Steven issue?"

"No, nothing at all," Pearl told him. "We've managed to look over half of the world and we've found no sign of him."

"This is not good, not good at all," the suited man got up and started to pace. "You know, other mayors don't have it this good. Sure, our city is a target for destruction more times than I'd like to admit, but at least we have you! You know what our city doesn't have?"

"Um...I'm not sure where this is going..." Pearl raised her eyebrow.

"Crime! Legitimate crime! Sure, we may have an underground wrestling league, but since our fair city was founded, we have never once experienced something like this! Usually when I see a giant glowing ball in the sky or something, I just repeat to myself that it is Gem business and I should really just relax," Mayor Dewey stared out the window and tapped it gently. "I can't relax this time. Not while Greg's boy is missing."

"We WILL find him, Mr. Mayor," Garnet stood up to leave. "Leave it to us."

"How am I supposed to do that?!" he called out to the three Gems. "I'm the mayor! It's my job to get involved with situations like this!"

\*AGITR\*

Greg Universe was in a bad place.

The loss of his son had really hit home. Though he had always known there was a risk involved with Gem missions, he didn't expect to feel so helpless and alone when the Gems told him what happened. His son was missing and he wasn't there to do anything

about it. At first he felt anger at the Gems for allowing Steven to accompany them on their mission, but he knew there was nothing that could be done about it.

This was Steven's life and Greg had to accept it.

"Thinking about Steven?" a female voice asked him. "You look like you could use a cup to warm you up."

The man looked up to see a woman with dark hair with a tea cup in her hand. "Thank you, Dr. Maheswaran. I'd love one," he sighed.

"I told you already, when you are my guest, you can call me Priyanka," she told him sternly.

The Maheswarans were rapidly becoming close family friends with the Universe family. Connie, their only daughter, was best friends with Steven, and was even training under Pearl to become a swordsman. Greg was initially nervous of the family, which is not that surprising due to their strict nature, but they were kindred spirits to him now. Both Priyanka and her husband Doug were doing everything they could to find his son and to keep Greg in good spirits. This included inviting him over when Priyanka was not working at the hospital. As he had made the call to close his car wash for a few days, Greg readily accepted the generous offer of hospitality.

"I'm guessing you haven't heard anything today?" Priyanka asked.

Greg shook his head. "Nothing yet. They are combing the last deserts of the planet...I guess."

"And they really think he is in a desert?" Priyanka scoffed. "I don't begin to understand magic."

"You get used to it after a while," the elder Universe shrugged. "Garnet says that he isn't...well you know..."

"So all you have to go on is some magical vision?" she sipped softly. "I fail to find comfort in that."

"It's all I have!"



"I know, Greg. I know," she put a hand on his shoulder. "It will all be over soon."

Just then, a door opened and a young girl walked in the house. She looked strikingly similar to her mother. Greg was still getting used to Connie Maheswaran without her glasses, which she wore religiously even after his son healed her eyesight. It was only recently that she discarded them all together.

"Mr. Universe! I just heard that the Gems came back!" Connie rushed over to him. Greg looked hopeful for a moment.

"Was Steven with them?!"

"No, but they met with the mayor," Connie started to sniff. "I'm scared for him."

"I am too, kiddo," Greg grimaced. "But we've got to have hope. It's what Steven would do." He got up to fetch his sandals. "I think I'll head over to the Temple. Maybe they have found some leads."

Connie looked to the man and then to her mother. "Mom, can I go too?"

"Out of the question!" Priyanka snapped. "This whole situation is dealing with one lost child! I could not bear it if you were lost too!"

"But..."

"No buts! Besides, it is time for violin practice. You know how important that is, don't you?"

The girl adopted a look of sadness and started to cry. Priyanka, being a mother through and through, went over and hugged her. "This is hard for you, isn't it?"

She nodded. "The Gems might know something mom! At this point, knowing anything is better than worrying alone!"

"Dr. Ma...Priyanka," Greg offered. "I could always bring her back here. I know it's not my place but..."

"You're right; it's not!" she told him sternly. However, after a moment she sighed. "I suppose I do have to work tonight anyway and your father is working a double...fine, you may go, but you are not to leave Mr. Universe's side for any reason. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes...yes, mom!" Connie weakly nodded. As she went to go over to Greg, Priyanka called her back over.

"Bring your violin. You can practice over there. I'm sure some music would do everyone some good."

"Yes, mom! Thank you, mom! I love you!" Connie rushed upstairs to get her violin.

The second she was gone, the Maheswaran matriarch shot Greg a look. "I know I don't have to say it, but I'm going to anyway. Greg, take care of her...and take care of yourself."

"I will, doc," he smiled. "Thank you for keeping me company. You know I'd do the same for you."

A few moments later, Connie ran down the stairs, violin case in hand and presented herself to the two adults. "I'm ready," she said dejectedly. "Have a good shift mom. I love you!"

The two Maheswarans gave each other a hug, which stung Greg's heart just a tiny bit.

\*AGITR\*

After a short drive, Greg's van finally returned to the beach in front of the house he helped Steven build. Inside, the Gems were sitting around a table, crossing off places on a map.

"It's not exactly a mountain range, but couldn't the snow fit the description?" Amethyst offered, pointing to an area near the Arctic Circle.

"I don't think Steven could stand that kind of temperature for an extended period of time," Pearl rubbed her forehead. "This is getting us nowhere!"

Garnet slammed her fist onto the table, breaking a small piece off. "We can't rest until we have searched every conceivable place! We might have to start repeating areas! He might have moved since the last time we looked!"

The door creaked open and the Gems whipped around hopefully. "St...oh. Hello, Greg," Pearl's face fell. "You as well, Connie."

"Heard you haven't had any luck," Greg bent down to pick up the discarded piece of table. "Guess I need to fix this later, huh?"

"Steven WILL be found, Greg," Garnet told him.

"I don't think I've heard you say anything else since Steven was lost," Greg took a deep breath. "Garnet, you can't keep blaming yourself for this."

"I'm not blaming myself!" Garnet said, clearly annoyed.

"Look, yes, Steven is a little kid and maybe taking him on missions isn't the best idea at his age, but he is still a Gem! You guys do magic stuff with him all the time! He went up into space for Pete's sake!"

He walked over to her and just as Connie's mother did to him, he put his hand on Garnet's shoulder. "I'm worried for him too, probably more worried than all of you. But getting ourselves bent out of shape isn't healthy. Maybe we just haven't looked at it from every direction."

"Greg, don't you think we have tried everything?" Pearl asked. "Garnet's Future Vision..."

"I know about the Future Vision!" Greg defended himself. "You Gems are typically on top of this stuff, but there have been times that thinking outside of your box was the answer! Remember the Wailing Stone?"

The Gems looked at each other and turned to face the two humans. "Alright Greg. You have the floor," Garnet said simply. "Tell us your thoughts."

Greg started to pace around and finally snapped his fingers. "You guys have been checking everywhere on Earth, but maybe he got sent somewhere else! Are there mountains and snow on Homeworld? Isn't that connected with that Rifting Stone thing?"

Pearl shook her head. "We don't have water on our planet, or at least we didn't in the past. It is possible that Homeworld has changed since we were there last..."

"Besides, the Rifting Stone doesn't work that way," Garnet explained. "It couldn't have taken him to Homeworld."

"But how does it work?" Connie asked. "All you've told us is that it is a personal Warp Pad."

Pearl put her hands to her head and projected the same images she showed Steven before he disappeared. "The Rifting Stone does indeed allow us to warp from place to place, but the manner of travel is far more dangerous and unpredictable. Using scientific knowledge founded by the late Gem Citrine, the Rifting Stone can literally tear open a rift in the layers of reality and bring you to another area of the connected plane," Pearl explained to the humans. "Unfortunately, there is the risk that you will get stuck between destinations, a proverbial limbo if you will. Nobody knows what that limbo actually is, but no Gems have managed to return from it if they got trapped."

"So what, you have to wish yourself somewhere? Imagine it in your head?" Greg asked.

"Normally, yes," Garnet added. "But by the war's end, it had suffered too much damage. There was no rhyme or reason to where it transported its victims. Sometimes it would work, sometimes it would send you to a place chosen at random, and other times it sent you to limbo."

Connie tapped her finger to the side of her cheek. "Wait...you said 'layers of reality,' right?"

"Yes...why?" Pearl asked quickly.

"Is it possible he isn't in THIS reality anymore?" Connie suggested.

"It is a common sci-fi and adventure trope. It was even used in *Overneath the Underworld* to kick off the halfway plot twist."

The Gems looked at each other and started to panic.

"That's...that's preposterous...right?" Pearl asked. "Right?!"

"That would explain why we couldn't find him," Garnet started to pace.

"The Rifting Stone WAS unstable!" Pearl started to freak out. "Oh my stars, is that where the lost Gems have gone?! IS THAT WHERE STEVEN IS?! HE COULD BE ATTACKED BY CORRUPTED GEMS!"

"Calm down, Pearl!" Amethyst told her.

"CALM DOWN?! HOW AM I SUPPOSED TO BE CALM?! STEVEN COULD BE DYING OUT THERE!" the dainty Gem started to hyperventilate.

"Okay," Greg said slowly. "So let's assume Connie is on to something here. How do you break down the walls of reality?" he paused. "My gosh, that's a fantastic song title!"

"Is this really the time to be thinking about that?" Connie frowned.

He blinked. "Good point. So, what kind of Gem doohickey can we bust out?"

Pearl stopped her breakdown to ponder the issue. Then she continued with her wailing, amazingly even louder than before. "WE CAN'T, GREG! IT IS IMPOSSIBLE!"

"I don't think we have anything that can do that," Amethyst thought about it and then banged her head on the table. "Ugh!"

"So that's it? We just give up?" Connie shouted. "We know where he is...somewhat... There has to be SOME WAY of warping reality or something! You guys are magical aliens! I refuse to believe that there is nothing that can be done."

The Beach House was silent for a minute. Then Amethyst opened her eyes wide and thought for a moment, carefully wording her idea. "Wait...I think I know how we can do it...but it goes against a promise we all made."

"What are you talking about, Amethyst?" Pearl asked. "What promise?!"

"I don't care about promises!" Greg said. "If it can save Steven, it will be worth it!"

All eyes were on Amethyst as they waited for her to tell them her plan. With a great sigh, Amethyst started to talk but stopped. After a moment, she finally found her voice.

"We can't bend the laws of reality...but we know someone who can... someone who we promised never to talk about again," the purple Gem winced.

The other two took in her words before Garnet started to shake her head. "No. No. No. There has to be another way."

"I don't get it. Who are you talking about?" Connie asked.

Pearl's eyes widened in shock. "You can't be serious, Amethyst...I mean..."

"Think about it! We can't do anything at all, but if anyone could it would be him!" Amethyst reasoned. "We said we'd get back Steven no matter the cost!"

"Um...can anyone explain just what is going on?" Greg asked.

"Darn it!" Garnet clenched her fist. "She's right! But we don't even know how we can call him!"

"With Connie! Duh! Doesn't he, like, help kids with their problems or something?"

"WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?!" Greg yelled, causing the Gems to momentarily calm down. "This is Steven we are talking about! Who could possibly be so bad that you would hesitate to call

him even if it means the return of my son?!"

The Gems gave each other disputing looks before finally relenting to the inevitable. "We need to summon a person so foul, so out there that it will literally make your head spin," Garnet warned.

"I'm willing to take that chance!" Greg stood his ground. "How do we save Steven?!"

"And what can I do to help?" Connie asked sternly.

With a great sigh, Pearl looked like she had seen a ghost. "We need you to call...to call..."

"Call who?!"

"Uncle Grandpa," she said weakly.

Connie and Greg looked at each other in confusion. "What the heck is an 'Uncle Grandpa?!'"

*Author's Note: This will NOT become an Uncle Grandpa story beyond using him to further along the plot. However, this was set up all the way back in Chapter Two. Remember kids, anything in Steven Universe is canon!*

# The Multiverse

"Back that up, you are telling me that this guy claims to be everyone in the world's uncle... AND grandpa?" Greg shook his head. "What does that even mean?!"

"We don't know! One day he just showed up to help Steven learn to control his shield," Pearl sighed. "It was one of the worst days of my life."

"We swore never to speak about it and bring it up," Garnet elaborated. "But desperate times call for desperate measures."

"Wait, you let a strange man you've never met hang out with my son?! Gah!"

"To be fair, we beat him up a lot," Amethyst offered.

Garnet nodded. "It was fun."

"So what exactly do I need to do?" Connie asked. "This is all getting hard to follow."

"How do I put this...?" Pearl started to pace. "We need you to have a problem that Uncle Grandpa can solve...something that I suppose affects your emotional well-being."

Greg blinked. "Wait, you guys aren't going to hurt Connie are you? Her parents would never forgive me!"

"No, Greg. We aren't going to hurt her...but we need her to act like she is hurt," Garnet told them. "Connie, I know you are up to it."

Connie nodded and then looked to the violin that she was forced to bring. "And I think I know just what to do!"

\*AGITR\*

With the sun getting ready to set in the background, Connie sat on the beach and started to play her instrument. After a little bit of



playing, she played a wrong note. "No!"

She started up again until she hit another wrong note. The girl started to growl. "No! I have to be better!"

This scene played out for what seemed to be a half hour. Connie finally threw the instrument to the ground and buried her head in her arms. She forced herself to cry. "I can't do it! I'll never be a good enough musician for my parents! Why can't I figure this instrument out?! Can't anyone help me?!"

She looked around, hoping to see anything unusual. The beach was as still as it was before. "I WISH SOMEONE WOULD HELP ME!" Connie purposely yelled.

Staring out from the screen door of the beach house, the Gems and Greg waited intently. In addition, a giant pink lion looked out from underneath the porch where it was formerly sleeping. Pearl bit her lip, Garnet twitched her eye behind her sunglasses, Amethyst yawned, and Greg looked confused. "Are you SURE this is the best approach for something like this?"

"Not really to be honest," Amethyst shrugged.

"Wait...I think something is happening!" Pearl shouted excitedly. "...I never thought I'd be so happy for something like this!"

Sure enough, a giant sandcastle erupted from the ground in front of Connie. The girl backed away in horror as tower after tower surrounded her. Once the building materialized, a figure appeared at the top of a sand balcony. He was dressed up like a Victorian nobleman. He wore a giant, pompous hat with a feather coming out of it.

"Hark, from yonder window breaks! It is the east, and Mr. Gus is the sun!" he spoke in a fake English accent. "Hmm...the sun seems to be going down. Can't have that."

The man put on a cowboy hat and lassoed the sun with a rope. He pulled it back to the sky and wiped his hands together. "There we go! Now I can really say...GOOD MORNING!"

"...what...what...what are you?!" Connie asked. "How...how...?!"

"How? How do you do!" the voice of the man spoke from behind her. Connie turned around and saw the man as he was. He was a bald man with a little pinwheel hat and a brown mustache. He wore a fanny pack and his pants were held up with rainbow suspenders. "I'm your Uncle Grandpa!"

"I...how did you make that sand castle?"

"What sand castle?" Uncle Grandpa asked.

"That sa..." Connie started before her jaw dropped. The sand castle he arrived in had vanished. Even the towers that were in front of her had disappeared. "I don't believe it!"

"BELIEVE IT!" Uncle Grandpa whipped out a headband and struck a pose. "Did I do that right? I don't know enough about that ninja dude. I really should check that place out one day..."

"So are you a genie or something? A fairy godfather?" Connie scratched her head.

"Nope! I'm just your Uncle Grandpa. Say..." Uncle Grandpa looked around. "This place seems kind of familiar. Where am I again?"

"...Beach City?" Connie offered.

He pulled out a giant map titled *THE CN MULTIVERSE* and muttered to himself. "Let's see...I'm in the top layer of the trio and based on the current projections I've skipped all the way from Otto Osworth all the way here...wait, Beach City?"

The girl blinked and nodded. A light bulb appeared on top of Uncle Grandpa's head. It was still off. "Wait...let me channel my Uncle Fester for a second." He put the light bulb in his mouth and it lit up. He took it out of his mouth and shoved it into his ear. "Beach City! That means this is where Steven Universe lives!"

"Yes! Yes it is! I'm Connie Maheswaran! Steven is my best friend!"

He started to clap his hands. "Oh, goodie! I'll be sure to drop in

before I'm done. So, I hear you have the music measles! I can fix..."

"Oh, I don't actually," Connie said. "I'm actually an above average violinist."

Uncle Grandpa started to scratch his head. "Uh...but...Belly Bag, didn't you say that she was having problems with her violin?"

"I did, Uncle Grandpa!" the fanny pack spoke, freaking Connie out to no end. "That's what she said! We've been bamboozled!"

"Allow us, Uncle Grandpa!" Pearl announced in a theatrical voice. The Gems jumped out from the house to the two and Greg trailed behind them, being carried by Steven's pet lion, Lion.

"Oh, it's you guys! Good Morning!" he waved. Then he blinked. "Wait...where's Steven? What's going on? I'm super confused!"

"I might not need help with my violin, Uncle Grandpa," Connie told him. "But we do need your help! Steven is missing! We think he got trapped in the walls of reality and is in another dimension! You are our only hope!"

Uncle Grandpa frowned and scratched his mustache. "Uh...what do you think?"

"I think that this is serious!" a second Uncle Grandpa told the original. Greg jumped back in shock.

"Mr. Myxlpplx here is freaking me out!" he muttered. "Look, the Gems say you are the only one who can help us find my son. Please help me!"

"Since you asked so nicely!" he smiled. He then played his own teeth like a piano and a doorway appeared. "Step right through this door and we'll find Steven faster than you can say..."

"Good Morning?" Connie suggested.

"Sure kid. But next time, let me do the talking."

\*AGITR\*

The Gems, Connie, and Greg were amazed to see the magical place they were in. "...are we in the back of a van?"

"The U.G.R.V. to be precise!" Uncle Grandpa smiled.

"This is like the tents in *Harry Potter*!" Connie said amazed. "How did you make the inside bigger than the outside?"

"Willpower, sister!" he nodded. "Hey, Mr. Gus! You around?"

From another room stepped out a green dinosaur wearing a white, sleeveless shirt. "'Sup, Uncle Grandpa...woah man! It's the Crystal Gems! Lion too! Man, Giant Realistic Flying Tiger is going to be happy to see you!"

"...is that a TALKING DINOSAUR?!" Greg said. "That...is actually pretty awesome."

"Greg!" Pearl muttered. "Don't encourage him!"

Mr. Gus extended his hands out to them. "Man, you guys don't get it! I'm, like, your biggest fans! You guys are probably the best thing to happen to the Multiverse in years!"

"Multiverse?" Amethyst asked.

"The Grant Morrison comic?" Greg scratched his head.

"Naw man," Mr. Gus corrected. "That's *Multiversity*. You see, we are all part of something called the 'CN Multiverse.' Very few people can access it. We party sometimes. Let's see...Moltar, TOM, The Joker that one time..."

"That must be it!" Garnet cut him off. "Steven must be lost in this 'Multiverse!' Tell us how to find him!"

"Steven's lost in the Multiverse you say?" Mr. Gus shook his head. "That's no good."

"Why isn't it good, Mr. Gus?" Connie asked.

Mr. Gus pulled up his computer and drew three circles on his editing

software. "Alright...this may be hard to follow, but I'll try anyway. These three circles represent the layers of reality within our Multiverse. We are in the topmost layer here," he colored in the top circle. "This is the main section of reality. Beyond that are the levels even we can't go to."

"Why? Are they restricted somehow?" Pearl asked, writing down notes as he went along.

"Only if a parent or guardian wants it to be," Mr. Gus shrugged. "This second layer here is guarded over by that fellow TOM I told you about. The stories he tells me...man it's crazy. I remember when he was asking us about that hamster dimension somehow ended up under his patrol. It was hilarious."

"Is anyone understanding this at all?" Greg asked. "This is making my brain feel like a cracked egg."

"Finally," Mr. Gus said, ignoring Greg. "We have the bottommost layer. This layer is practically inaccessible. For a few years, they combined with TOM's area but are once again separate entities. We can't really explain what is happening there...it just kind of exists."

"So let me get this straight," Connie tried to put the pieces together. "Steven is stuck in one of these layers of reality, right? What if he were stuck in one of those other layers? How can we get him back."

"Simple! They can do it!" Uncle Grandpa pointed to the Gems excitedly.

"...I'm sorry, but what?" Pearl asked.

"The last time we met, you guys got trapped in the layers between dimensions! The one with the sunglasses even created a hole in reality!" he pointed to Garnet. "That means you can cross places even I can't go!"

The Gems and humans just sat there waited for a clearer explanation. "I'm beginning to regret opening my mouth," Amethyst muttered.

"Look, we can help you get Steven back, but we can't join you," Mr.

Gus informed them. "Uncle G, do you still have that extra Belly Bag Badge?"

"I loaned it to Pizza Steve!"

Pearl and Garnet immediately shot Amethyst a look. Her eyes widened with fear. "...you don't mean that piece of pizza with the sunglasses...do you?"

"Yup!" Uncle Grandpa honked his nose.

"I...er...I kind of...ate him..." the purple Gem blushed.

"Oh, is that all?" Uncle Grandpa laughed. "Here, give me a second."

He took off his Belly Bag and put it on Amethyst. The older gentleman opened it up and started to rummage around in it. After a moment, he yelled "Aha!" and pulled out...a piece of pizza with sunglasses.

"Woah! That was one place I NEVER want to visit again!" the rude piece of food shouted. "What happened, Uncle G? One second I was chilling with my pal Brownie Ders and now I'm being pulled out of the stomach of that one purple thing that ate me that time!"

"WHY IS THE FOOD TALKING?!" Greg freaked out.

"Wait...you didn't come from my stomach?" Amethyst asked, trying to make sense of this.

Pizza Steve pulled down his sunglasses. "Listen babe, if anyone ever eats me, I just come back here. It's all part of my awesome flow."

"Pizza Steve, do you have the Belly Bag Badge?" Uncle Grandpa asked him.

"You're darn right I do! I still get to use this for another three weeks!" He pulled out a small pin that looked like Uncle Grandpa's fanny pack.

"Look Pizza Steve, we need to use it! Steven Universe is in danger

and if we don't save him, he might be lost forever in the Multiverse!"

"You mean the Grant Morrison comic?" Pizza Steve asked.

Connie walked behind the talking piece of Italian cuisine and took the Badge from him. "Sorry! We will give it back to you!"

"Hey! You do not take from Pizza Steve! Pizza Steve takes from you!" he fumed.

"Please, Pizza Steve? I'll let you use it for another month!" Uncle Grandpa begged.

The food sighed. "Fine...I'll do it. If only because that's a month that Mr. Gus can't use it!"

The young girl started to look over the badge and fiddled around with it. "So, what does it do?"

"It allows you to transport yourself from world to world. If you press this," he pointed to the molded in zipper. "It will open up the rift. Every rift will open up at the same point in the worlds. Whenever you reach the world that Steven will be on, Lion should automatically be able to sense him and take you directly to him. Since you don't know where that world is, you have to follow the dimensions in order. This map here is your best friend."

He handed the map Uncle Grandpa was using to Garnet. "There are new dimensions and worlds being added to the Multiverse every day. Keep your guard up."

"What do we do when we find Steven?" Greg asked. "Keep going to every world until we come back to this one?"

"Oh, that's easy," Mr. Gus turned the badge to its back and showed them a small image of Uncle Grandpa's face. "Just click this and then press the other button and you will automatically be sent back here."

"I think I got everything written down!" Pearl finished scribbling. "Are you joining us, Uncle Grandpa?"

"I can't Pearl. I have to continue to help the children of the world!" Uncle Grandpa said. "Besides, the author said in the last chapter that I'm not a major character in this fanfiction!"

The Gems all looked to each other and shrugged. Clearly Uncle Grandpa's subtle breaking of the fourth wall went over their heads.

"So this is it. Gems, are you ready?" Garnet asked sternly.

Pearl and Amethyst nodded. Lion growled in agreement. Garnet then turned to Greg and Connie. "Greg, I don't think you and Connie should be coming on this mission. It is too dangerous."

"No! Steven needs me! He needs all of us!" Connie stood her ground.

"But you don't even have your sword...or Rose's for that matter!" Pearl argued.

"Yes she does!" Uncle Grandpa interjected. He handed her a backpack. "I picked them up for you when you weren't looking and stuffed 'em in my backpack! Here's that big pink sword and your violin! You don't want to forget your practice!"

"How...you know what, I'm just going to stop questioning everything that I've seen in this place," Connie blinked before allowing herself to enjoy the backpack that defied the laws of physics.

"Connie," Greg started. "I'm with the Gems on this one. We shouldn't get involved with this one. We've already lost Steven..."

"You're telling me you don't want to save him?!" Connie yelled. "Don't you want to be there when we rescue your son?!"

"Of course I do!" Greg folded his arms. "I want to do that more than anything in the world! But I can't risk losing you! I can't put your parents through that!"

"Well then it's a good thing we are with the Crystal Gems. They always save the day," Connie stared intently at her elders.

"And if you think they can't, they'll always find a way," Greg laughed



softly. "Darn it. Fine, we're coming too. If we are saving Steven, we are saving him as a family!"

The Gems nodded, however reluctantly. They activated the badge and with that, they vanished into the CN Multiverse.

"Think they'll be okay, Uncle Grandpa?" Mr. Gus asked.

"I know so, Mr. Gus. I know so..."

\*AGITR\*

The first rift opened up and the Gems found themselves in a cold, sterile environment. Various pieces of equipment filled every corner of the never ending room. The sound of computers blinking and cogs pounding filled the air.

"This...this is amazing!" Connie let out an excited breath.

"This must be some kind of industrial laboratory..." Pearl examined a computer terminal. "The handiwork is extraordinary."

Garnet shook her head. "But it's not a desert or a snowy field. This can't be where Steven is."

"Well how do we know that?" Greg asked. "This is one room! You don't know what is..."

"Excuse me?!" a young, accented voice called out. "What are you doing in my laboratory?!" From another end of the lab, a small child in a lab coat and glasses shuffled toward them. He eyes them. "Who sent you?! What is with the pink lion?! Is Mandark up to something?!"

"Um..." Pearl tried to find the right words. "Little boy..."

"My name is Dexter, madam, and I do not have time for pleasantries! I am a man of science and your presence interrupts my work!" he grunted. "I do not know how you got in here but I must ask you to vacate my room at once!"

"You BUILT this...in your room?!" Connie asked, amazed. "You

must be some kind of genius."

The boy started to blush for a moment, but shook it off. "Genius I may be, I still must ask you depart. Shoo! Get out!"

The Gems started to protest, but Lion started to roar. He shook his head in sadness. "You can't sense Steven here, Lion, can you?" Greg's face saddened a bit. "Should have known that he wouldn't be in the first world we tried."

"We have to press on," Garnet commanded. "We are sorry for breaking in, little Dexter. You will never see us again." She pressed the badge and in a shining light, Dexter was left alone with his machines.

"...something is telling me that I do not want to know what that just was," he shook his head.

\*AGITR\*

The next area that the Gems landed was far more suburban. It seemed to be a giant city or town. Lion sniffed the air anxiously.

"What is it, Lion? Is it Steven?!" Pearl asked frantically.

The creature shook his head put pointed with his paw. As he did so, multiple giant monsters broke down several buildings in a roaring rampage. Greg screamed and jumped back behind Garnet. "What the heck are those things?!"

"It looks like...a Corrupted Gem!" Amethyst said in surprise. "Woah! This must be where all of those lost Gems must have ended up!"

"So why isn't Steven here?" Connie asked.

"The Rifting Stone has been dormant for decades...it might have instinctively shifted itself from this world to another," Pearl offered, watching the destruction their former Gem comrades were inflicting. "If those are Gems..."

"That makes defending this town our responsibility," Garnet said sternly. The Gems all produced their weapons and were prepared to

fight the wayward Gems, but a rainbow of light filled the sky. In one swift motion, three little girls started fighting the monsters with little to no effort expended.

"I think those kids can handle it," Greg pointed out.

"Agreed," Garnet nodded. "Let's not waste any more time here."

"But..." Pearl watched as a girl wearing a green and black dress started to punch a monster directly into the sky. "Surely we can contain their Gems? Try to find a way to help them?"

Garnet shot her a pained look. "Steven is waiting for us alone and friendless. We WILL find him no matter how many worlds we look at! He is the priority!"

The elegant Gem nodded remorsefully, but indicated she was ready to move on. The Gem warrior activated the Belly Bag Badge once more. Again and again they travel the Multiverse and again and again they fail to locate him. How many worlds will it take before the Universe family will be reunited?

And will they be too late?

# The Guest Of Honor

The calming breeze of the sea tickled Steven's nose. After raiding Mr. 3's ship and grabbing Genevieve's art supplies (including the painting of Steven that he begged her to keep), the Going Merry sailed off onto the Grand Line toward Alabasta using the Eternal Pose the Unluckies provided. Their only hiccup so far was a giant goldfish but now was not the time to worry about such things.

Now was the time to party.

"So then all of the Gem mutants cornered me, Connie, and her mom! I didn't know if my shield could keep them back!" Steven was entertaining the crew (and guests) with stories from his home dimension, specifically the last major event that happened with him and Connie. The only people who weren't really involved were Nami (who was half-listening while staring at the Eternal Pose), Vivi (who was keeping Nami company), Sanji (who was in the kitchen cooking a meal), and Petrea (who was making the dessert).

"Woah!" Luffy said, completely engrossed in the story. "Did her mom let her use the sword or what?!"

"Well...actually she kind of just took the sword from her. I popped the bubble and she jumped up on my shield and sliced the thing in half like this!" He demonstrated a sword swipe and fell to the floor as if he were the creature. "Gah!"

"Shishishishishi! Man, you could really be a great storyteller!" Luffy laughed. "You fit right in with us here!"

"Yay!" Steven cheered. "I'm a pirate!"

"That's right! You are a Straw Hat no matter what!" Luffy promised him. Then he handed him some chopsticks. "Here, put these in your nose and mouth! Let's dance!"

Steven looked at the chopsticks in confusion, but then shrugged. "What the heck? A pirate's life for me!"

The boy, the captain, the long-nosed one, and the duck started to dance in a line while cheering. Watching the scene, Zoro shook his head. "Great. Just what we need. Two Luffys."

"The kid grows on you," Damian told him. "Say...I'm sorry about..."

"Save it; not interested," Zoro dismissed it. "If you're on the ship now, that means that it's water under the bridge. Just don't give us a reason to go swimming."

The bomb man nodded and went back to drinking his grog. "God, it's been too long since I've had anything other than tea."

"On this ship, we pour beer and sake," Zoro raised his own glass. "Drink up!"

The two drank their beer in delight. However, as Damian wiped away the suds, he noticed he was being watched by the trio of youths and the lone animal. "You can stop pretending that you aren't staring at me!" Damian yelled. "Come out with it!"

Steven took the chopsticks out of his nose and walked over to them. "Well...I was thinking..."

"Your first mistake," he mumbled. Zoro choked in his drink trying to stifle back a laugh.

"You know that my dream is to be back with my family right? And how Luffy wants to be the Pirate King and Usopp wants to be a brave warrior? Even Genevieve wants to be the greatest painter in the world...well this world," Steven pointed to the slightly older girl, who was painting the party and keeping to herself. She noticed the attention and gave a slight wave before returning to her artwork.

"...where is this going?"

"What's your dream?" Steven asked.

"STEVEN!" Usopp yelled. "YOU WERE SUPPOSED TO EASE HIM INTO THAT QUESTION!"

"Ahh! Sorry!"

"Is that really all?" Damian shook his head.

Steven nodded his eagerly, flashing a giant smile. The former Mr. 5 kept a solid frown on his face. To counter this, Steven tried to adopt puppy-dog eyes.

"Kid, what I want to do with my life is between me, myself, and I," he finally said. "Don't force the issue!"

"Aww," Steven said dejectedly. He moped back to the others.

"You know that they are going to keep pestering you about it while you are on the ship, right?" Zoro pointed out.

"They'll know when I want them to know," Damian picked his nose.

"Whatever," Zoro shrugged. "If you need me, I'll be training."

"...in the middle of a party after drinking a beer?" Damian raised an eyebrow. "What spurred that on?"

"You did actually," Zoro walked away. "You reminded me of my limitations. I allowed myself to get caught by you and that wax guy. If I'm going to be the best swordsman in the world, I need to learn to cut more than wax: I need to cut iron!"

The bomb man blinked and cleaned off his sunglasses. "Damn fool...does he have any idea what he is getting himself into?"

"I do!" Zoro yelled to him. "Stop thinking out loud!"

Damian grumbled and walked away to watch Zoro train. "If he's going to train, he might as well need a partner to spot him..." As he moved past Steven and the others, they immediately stopped talking and looked away. "Ugh, you people..."

Sure enough, the three of them were whispering to each other near Genevieve's work station the second Damian moved out of earshot. "Okay, so Operation: Discover Damian's Dream is a go!" Luffy looked to each of his nakama, who nodded.

"This will be a tough mission captain," Usopp told him sternly. "I

hope we are up to the task."

"We have to be," Steven held his own. "If not for our sake then for the ship's"

"Agreed!" they all nodded.

"Quack!" Carue the duck added.

"Do you just want me to tell you?" Genevieve asked nonchalantly from her little station. "I can use my Color Traps to..."

"No!" the three of them yelled.

She cocked her head. "Why not?"

"It's part of the game!" Steven exclaimed. "That'd be cheating!"

"That's right!" Usopp nodded. "No powers or outside influences. He has to tell us of his own free will...that means you too Luffy!"

They all looked at Luffy beginning to stretch his ear over in his direction, causing Steven to laugh. Genevieve rolled her eyes.

"You guys are odd," she told them.

\*AGITR\*

In the kitchen, Sanji tried to perform his typical flare with exaggerating every single action he was doing. It did not matter to him that this woman was his enemy mere hours before: she was a gorgeous sight to behold and he intended on making her feel at home. With him. In the kitchen.

Alone.

"To me, my dear Petrea-chan, cooking is a work of art. Every slice, every bit of preparation is like the steps of a dance. Tell me...do you like to dance?" Sanji tried to hit on her.

The woman raised her eyebrow and chuckled. "I do happen to like to dance...and by dance I mean cook," she smiled. "I have to say,

for pirates you have high quality ingredients here. Would you hand me that marshmallow creme?"

Sanji grabbed the white fluff and handed it to her. "And might I ask what delicacy you are making with my creme?"

She put her hands on her hips. "If you must know, it's my creamy chocolate fudge! I haven't had the chance to make it since I was a little girl." Then she adopted a wicked look on her face. "You know...if you are lucky, I might just let you lick the bowl."

Hearts filled Sanji's eyes as he went back to tenderizing the meat. 'Oh, I know she tried to hurt my Vivi-chan, but how can I stay mad at her?!' he thought to himself in his blissful state.

The former Miss Valentine merely chuckled. 'He's so easy to read and play with.'

"So..." Sanji got up to courage to ask. "Why chocolate? What made you want to be a chocolatier?"

"Me?" she blushed. "Well...when I was young I lost both of my parents to a group of bandits. I was an outcast, especially after I found my Devil Fruit and realized what I could do. Nobody wanted to acknowledge me. After a few years, a kind restaurant owner took me in and showed me how to be his dessert chef. It was the first time in a long time I was really happy..."

"So why'd you leave then?"

Petrea's face grew grim and lost all the playfulness she had before. "A Celestial Dragon visited our town and came to our restaurant. It was labeled the best restaurant on the South Blue, so he wanted to see if it was true," she laughed grimly. "Clearly it wasn't up to his standards. He burned down the restaurant and wanted to take me to be his servant. I managed to escape and started a new life for myself. I became a fierce bounty hunter, targeting mainly bandits to make my way in life. Clearly I was doing something right as Mr. 0...Crocodile sent a representative to me and offered me a place in Baroque Works, promising me an end to the running."



The blonde-haired woman sniffled a bit, trying to hold back tears. "What fools we were...to think that causing more misery to people would end the pain. In the end, I'm no better than those bandits that killed my parents."

Sanji handed her a handkerchief. She graciously accepted it and blew her nose. "You put all of that behind you now. You are a far better person than those shitty bandits. We all have our demons Petrea-chan, you'll learn to live with them. Besides, you are far too beautiful to put yourself through that."

"Kyahahaha! You are persistent, Sanji," Petrea weakly laughed through her tears. "But thoughtful nevertheless. Now stop it you! I have fudge to cook!"

The Straw Hat cook smiled at the light compliment and went to finish his meal when he noticed a small red spot on the back of her neck. "Say...do you want something for that?"

"For what?" Petrea asked.

"I think you got a bug bite or something on your neck," he pointed out. "I think we might have some ointment or something...very rudimentary but it might help."

She felt the back of her neck and found the bump. "Huh, what do you know? I think I'll be fine, Sanji," the woman coughed and chuckled. "What I do need is that vanilla extract you are trying to hide from me."

\*AGITR\*

Vivi, who had taken the Eternal Pose for a moment from Nami, stared out at the light waves of the sea and sighed. 'We are still so far away from my people...I hope we can make it there in time...'

"Hey Princess!" the youthful voice of Steven startled her. Nami, who had closed her eyes for a moment next to Vivi, jumped. "Hi Nami!"

"Gah! Steven, don't sneak up on me!" she said clutching her heart. She laughed a little bit.

The half-Gem blushed. "Sorry...oh! Did I wake you up from a nap, Nami?"

"...no..." Nami pouted briefly. She folded her arms and then stuck out her tongue at the boy, who laughed.

"And please, just call me Vivi! Princess is too formal for me!" the blue-haired teenager added with a smile.

"Okay, Pr...Vivi!" he returned his smile. "So...whatcha thinking about?"

"My people, Steven...we are so close to being able to save them," Vivi looked out to the sea. "I've been away from them for so long. I just want to see peace return."

"What can I do to help?" Steven asked. "Steven Universe is reporting for duty!"

"Hahaha," Vivi laughed. "Oh Steven, you are helping just by being here. It will take all of us to stop Crocodile's plans."

Steven made a face. "So just who IS Crocodile anyway? You all keep saying his name but nobody ever told me who he was!"

"Crocodile...is a monster. As one of the Shishibukai, he was once one of the worst pirates ever to terrorize the Grand Line. Now he works for the government and they will look the other way for whatever it is that he does as long as he helps them when they ask him to."

"So he's a bad guy pretending to be a good guy?"

"That's one way of looking at it," Nami grumbled. Her face was red and she tried to put her head back on the ship.

The boy curled his hands into fists. "That's just wrong! Why won't the government do something about him?!"

"The government doesn't know Steven," Vivi sighed. "Baroque Works has been covering everything up and blaming it on rebel activity."

"Rebels?! Like Luke Skywalker and Princess Leia?!" Steven asked excitedly.

Vivi had no proper response for that so she shook her head.  
"Um...no...? Are they from your world?"

"That's right! You guys don't know about *Star Wars*! I have so much to teach you!" Steven whispered in shock. He shook his head and thought about what she was saying while the two ladies shrugged to each other, assuming that *Star Wars* had to do with his Gem ancestry. "This sounds really serious."

"It is. If I can't make it back to Alabasta alive...I don't know what my people would do."

Steven gave her a thumbs up. "Don't worry! I'll keep you alive and in one piece!"

"Well that is a comforting thought."

"Say...can I ask you something else?" Steven fiddled with his thumbs while he talked.

"Ask away!"

"Are..." Steven started slowly. "Are you still mad at Petrea and the others?"

The princess looked down to the others having their fun. Genevieve was still painting and Petrea and Sanji were bringing out food. It was clear that this was a very hard question for her to answer. "I...I don't know, Steven."

"I know that they all did bad things, but I think they are really sorry for it," Steven told her simply.

"It's very hard...to let that go," Vivi made a face. "They tried to use my country and kill my people."

The boy turned his head up to the sky. He sighed. "Yeah...but they'll make up for it!"

"You are just a barrel of optimism, aren't you?" Vivi ruffled his hair.

"Haha cut it out! Cut it out! Nami, save me! I'm being attacked!" Steven laughed. He looked over to the navigator. "Nami? NAMI?!"

Vivi followed Steven's gaze and saw what he was yelling about. The orange-haired navigator had collapsed to the floor and was wheezing. "Everyone, please hurry!" Vivi yelled. "Nami fainted!"

Stretching up to where they were, Luffy (and Usopp, who held onto him) rushed to his nakama's side and tried to wake Nami up. Vivi had to push them away. "What are you idiots doing?! She has a major fever! Yelling and shaking her is the last thing you want to do!"

"I didn't know!" Luffy backed away incredibly fast. "I've never been sick!"

"Me either!" Usopp joined in.

"WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU PEOPLE?!" Vivi asked shocked. Then she looked over to Genevieve, who had brought up her supplies and started to paint the scene. "AND WHY ARE YOU PAINTING THIS?!"

The girl shrugged and set the paints aside. "We need to bring her to her bed," the girl pointed out.

"Wait!" Steven cried. "I think I know what to do!"

The crew waited for him to speak. Instead, Steven spit on his own hands and rubbed Nami's head. Sprinting up from the lower lever where he and Petrea were still bringing out food, Sanji went to kick the boy away. "HOW DARE YOU SPIT ON OUR SICK NAMI-SAN?!"

"Knock it off!" Petrea floated up to them and blocked the kick. "Rude as he may be, I doubt he is doing that for no reason!"

"COULD EVERYONE PLEASE BE QUIET?" Steven yelled. "My spit has healing powers...but it doesn't work all the time!"

"WHAT?! REALLY?!" Luffy and Usopp were shocked and impressed

at the same time.

The half-Gem looked at his hands and closed his eyes. "I'm going to try to make her better, but I need to focus!"

The boy started rubbing Nami's temples and then shoulders. The crew watched in awe, save Zoro (who was training) and Damian (who was with him). As this was happening, Sanji's eyes twitched with jealousy.

After a moment, Steven hung his head with shame. "I...I tried."

Petrea put her hand on the boy's shoulder and offered a weak smile after a cough. "That's all anyone could ask Steven. Come on boys, get her into bed!"

"WHY DO WE HAVE TO DO IT?!" Usopp yelled. "Can you use your Devil Fruit powers to float her down there?!"

"YOU DARE ASK A LADY TO DO A MAN'S JOB?!" Sanji retorted back.

"Could you idiots keep it down!" a third voice added. "My head is killing me!"

Vivi nodded. "Yeah, listen to Nami!" Then she paused and blinked for a moment. "WAIT, NAMI?!"

Sure enough, Nami had slowly stirred from off the floor and felt her forehead. "What's on my head?"

"NAMI-SAN, YOU ARE OKAY!" Sanji started to weep tears of joy. "STEVEN, YOU ARE A MIRACLE!"

"I did it!" Steven cried out excitedly. "My healing powers are working! This is great!"

"Wow!" Luffy clapped his hands. "I now declare you to be our musician, storyteller, AND doctor! Hip! Hip!"

"Hoary!" Usopp and Steven yelled. Genevieve gave a soft clap and merely gave a weak "Woo-hoo."

Nami proceeded to knock each of them in the back of their heads.  
"YOU SHOULDN'T BE CHEERING TO THAT!"

"Ow!" Luffy cried. "Why did you hit us?"

"Because this just exposed a major flaw in our crew! If Steven's spit didn't work, I could have died! We have no doctor on the ship..."

"We have Steven!" Luffy pointed to the boy, who waved.

"He doesn't count! What happens when he gets back home? We will be without a doctor!"

"She has a point," Genevieve offered. "You guys would be a mess without Steven."

"Like you contribute a lot," Usopp whispered.

"I gave you treasure!"

"And we are all better off for it!" Nami added hastily. "Now I don't know about you, but all of that excitement is making me hungry."

Sanji stood at attention and offered the lady a hand. "My dear Nami-san, allow me to escort you to the deck, where Petrea-chan and I prepared a full course banquet for everyone to enjoy. Seeing as you are the guest of honor, I do believe you should have the first taste!"

"Hey! Steven was the guest of honor!" Petrea fumed.

"Wait...food...THAT MEANS MEAT!" Luffy yelled as he jumped off the railing to eat as much food as possible.

"My first pirate food!" Steven clapped excitedly. "This is so cool!"

"Come on, Steven!" Petrea offered. "Grab on and we'll beat them to it!"

"Devil Fruit powers!"

In no time at all the feast began and the main courses were all eaten and enjoyed. Steven was a bit wary at first of all of the fancy food

Sanji prepared, but it was better than purely eating Genevieve's rice crackers. Thankfully, Sanji truly earned the title of "chef" and everything he prepared was as delicious as Kofi's pizza or Peedee's fry bits.

For a boy so experienced, Steven truly lived a very sheltered life.

Once the dinner portion concluded, Petrea brought out her fudge, which brought tears of happiness to everyone's eyes. The woman was so overwhelmed with pride and embarrassment that she fainted on the spot.

"Aww, she's bashful!" Steven smiled.

"Okay Petrea, that was funny, but you can get up now!" Usopp told her. "We just had one sickness scare; we don't need a second."

The woman did not respond besides giving another cough. Her coughing then turned into hyperventilation. With each hack and wheeze, the former Baroque Works Agent floated up in the air and then came crashing down. The Straw Hats started to look confused about what was happening before Sanji's jaw dropped.

"My god...that bug bite on the back of her neck...PETREA-CHAN IS SICK TOO!" He grabbed Steven by the collar and pointed to her. "Quick! Do your healing thing!"

"Wah! But how am I supposed to help her?! She keeps flying away with every cough!" Steven panicked.

"What the hell is going on over here?!" Zoro and Damian ran over from their training, each drenched in sweat. "The entire ship is shaking. Are we under attack?!"

Everybody pointed to the sky where Petrea's coughing kept raising her up and down in the air. Damian ran his hands through his hair. "Damn it. Every time Petrea ever got sick, her Devil Fruit powers would go all haywire. We need to get her down here and bind her before she does any more damage!"

"It's okay! I can spit on her if you bring her down!" Steven nodded.

The two men just looked at each other and shook their heads. Zoro leaped up in the air and landed on Damian's hands, who threw him up at his former partner. With the added weight of a second body, Petrea went plummeting toward the ship.

"AHHH! AT THAT SPEED, THE GOING MERRY IS GOING TO BE DAMAGED FOR SURE!" Usopp freaked out.

"I'll get them!" Luffy said, stretching his arms out to them. Damian grabbed them and tied the arms around their waists. Luffy reeled them in and caught them with his rubber body.

Grabbing her paint brush, Genevieve started mixing colors together.  
**"Color Trap: Tranquil Green."**

The coughing Petrea started to calm down and steadied out her breathing. Vivi took her temperature and shook her head. "This is bad. Her fever is even worse than Nami's. Steven, please try to help her!"

The boy nodded and spit on his hands again. Damian gagged a bit as he picked his nose out of anxiety. He started to rub her throat and stomach and waited for the results. He looked to Vivi, who checked her temperature again.

"Steven...I'm sorry. It didn't do anything this time."

"Nooooooo!" Steven started to cry. "I thought I had it under control! Now she's hurting really badly! Are there doctors in Alabasta?!"

Vivi nodded but her expression was dark. "There are, but if we keep going at this pace, she'll never make it there alive."

"AHHHHH! OH NO! WHAT DO WE DO?!" Steven ran around in circles, panicking. Suddenly he stopped and sat down. "Ah, it will all be okay. I am sure we can find a doctor before Alabasta, right fellow pirates?"

The remaining Straw Hats looked to Steven in confusion and then to Genevieve, who put a fudge square in her mouth. "What? What did I do?"



# The Bored Painter

The crew converged for an emergency meeting after putting Petrea to bed. Steven stood vigil by her side, feeling responsible for not being able to heal her. The purpose was twofold: get her back to full health and to find a doctor to join the crew.

"If we can't find a doctor soon, we will all be in trouble," Nami explained. "Petrea's powers being out of control poses a big problem to the ship and to her health. It can't be good for her health flying around like that."

"Petrea was always a lightweight when it came to getting sick," Damian contributed.

Nami merely hit him. "Stop making puns! This is serious!"

The bomb man hit his bruise. "The kid would have laughed."

"Besides, this wasn't just some cold," Sanji inhaled his cigarette. "She had a bug bite on her neck."

"That's even worse," Vivi thought about it. "She needs medicine. It might be poisonous or even just an allergic reaction..."

"Man Vivi, you're really smart!" Luffy complimented her. "How do you know this stuff?"

"I read a lot in my spare time...and have had tutors back at the palace..." Vivi blushed.

"Ah," the men all nodded in understanding.

"Wow. Tutors," Genevieve stated. "The key to Baroque Works' downfall."

Vivi shot her a look and Genevieve looked down. "That was out of line...my bad."

"So the question is where the next island is..." Zoro pointed out. "Our

Log Pose still hasn't set and the one pretty boy over here has is set only to Alabasta."

Nami closed her eyes and put a finger to the air. Luffy, Usopp, and Sanji cocked their head in confusion. "Uh...Nami-san...what are you...?"

"A cold front is coming from the North East...we should probably be reaching a winter island in about an hour and a half," she concluded. "Not too far out of the way, so we should be fine."

"...you people aren't normal, do you know that?" Damian stood there in shock.

"Says the man who can turn his spit into a bomb," Nami retorted. "I happen to be an excellent navigator thank you very much!"

"So it's decided then?" Luffy asked everyone. "We follow Nami's instincts and hope that there is a doctor on that island?"

"Agreed!" all but Vivi said. Luffy gave her a look.

"My people are being slaughtered...and a civil war is brewing...so let's get a doctor fast already, okay?" the princess finally nodded.

Thus it was decided that the priority was to find a doctor.

\*AGITR\*

At Petrea's bedside, Steven stared intently at the slumbering woman. Every now and then he kept looking at his hands and curling them up. There was no question about it:

Steven felt responsible for her current condition.

"Maybe I'll try just one more time," he told himself. "Yeah, this time it will work!"

He spit on himself once more and tried to rub her forehead gently. He closed his eyes tightly and prayed with all of his might. "Please... please..."

He opened them and felt her forehead. No change. "Gah! What's the point of having healing powers if they never work when you want them to?!"

He started to pace around and finally just slumped back into the dingy chair he was sitting on before. "Well...maybe I'll try again in a few minutes. Yeah, then it will work!"

"Steven...if you...if you keep this up," a weak voice spoke to him. "You'll run out...out of saliva all together."

Steven acknowledged the former Miss Valentine and realized that his heart had melted. She looked so frail and fragile. The woman started to cough, and Steven surrounded her with a bubble so she wouldn't fly out of the room.

"Ow!" Petrea gently rubbed her forehead. "These things hurt!"

"Gah! Sorry! Sorry!" Steven panicked. "I didn't mean to hurt you more! I just didn't want you flying away!"

"Kyaha..." she started to laugh before coughing again, this time curling her hands around her head to soften the blow. "Stop worrying about me. I'll be fine! Really!"

"You don't look fine," Steven pointed out.

"Would I lie to you?" Petrea smiled.

The half-Gem made a face and Petrea's smile faltered.

"...oh...Steven, I..."

"I told you already I forgive you!" Steven put his hand on hers. "I mean you didn't really lie to me, you just kind of bent the truth. But still, none of that matters! If you want to make it better with anyone, it should be Vivi."

"The princess?" Petrea pulled her hand away. "How can she expect to...to let everything I did just...just go?"

Steven patted her head. "You'll think of something. After all, *it's getting better all the time! Me used to be angry young man! Me*

*hiding my head in the sand," Steven sang softly, causing Petrea to chuckle a bit. "You gave me the word, I finally heard! I'm doing the best that I can! I've got to admit it's getting better, a little better all the time!"*

Petrea's weak laughing cut Steven short. He started to panic again. "Gah, I don't want to over excite you!"

"How..." Petrea started before coughing again. "How is it possible that you know all these songs?"

The boy laughed. "I get by with a little help from my friends!"

"Do you now?" She smiled. "They are lucky, you know."

"Who?"

"Your friends," Petrea closed her eyes to force herself to get some rest. "They're lucky that they have..." she said as she yawned. "...you looking out for them."

The comment made Steven smile. He adjusted her blankets and watched her fall asleep, weak but in decent spirits.

Of course, it was in that moment, when Petrea had finally fallen asleep, that the ship started to shake uncontrollably as a giant shape darkened the lone window of the room.

"Wha...wha...what is happening?!" Steven freaked out. He turned to the now awake Petrea and flashed a smile. "'Scuse me! Don't leave the bed!"

The boy ran past Nami and Vivi, who had come to check on Petrea's condition, and closed the door behind them leaving a very confused and very sick Petrea to wonder just what was happening outside.

"Do...do I want to know...?"

"No," they both assured her.

\*AGITR\*

Genevieve was bored.

Honestly, she was a very bored individual to begin with, but recently she had gotten a sense of excitement in her life. Steven had caused her to realize the gravity of her crimes, which had caused her to reconsider her stance on a lot of the morally questionable things she did in the past. Thankfully, she seemed to be somewhat accepted here on the Going Merry.

Genevieve assumed that it was due to not actually attacking the pirates like Damian and Petrea did.

She found the captain, Luffy, to be rather like Steven: odd yet endearing. Unlike the cruel Mr. 3, he seemed to truly care about his crew mates. He didn't hesitate at all in letting her sail with him. The party showed that he was an animated person and that his crew was a lively bunch.

As such, she felt like the odd girl out. Still, it didn't bother her. It just gave her plenty of material to work with in her paintings.

One such example was the odd-looking gentlemen who just moments prior commented on the increasingly cold weather and giant ship that just raised up from the sea afterwards. Obviously, the others were making a big deal about it. Genevieve, however, was too tired to react to it with more than a meager "Wow."

A giant heavysset man resembling a hippo stepped onto the ship with several of his men. They all pointed their guns at the pirates and all Genevieve could do was shake her head. 'These idiots have no idea what they are getting into.'

The hippo man started babbling on about a "Drum Kingdom" but the young painted just started to zone out. 'I wish I brought a jacket...if this nearby island is wintry, I need to get one immediately. At this rate, my paint will freeze.'

"What's going...ahh! Guns! Don't shoot!" a familiar voice snapped her back into the here and now. 'Steven!'

"Ah look! Another measly member of your pathetic crew! What is

he? The cabin boy?" the hippo person laughed.

"I'm Steven, the temporary musician of this crew! Who are you? Another pirate?!" Steven asked eagerly.

'Where does he get all of his energy from?' Genevieve pondered.

"You dare talk to his highness Lord Wapol?!" the man who stood on the water earlier yelled.

Then he went to hit him.

As Steven cowered for a moment, several things happened at once. Damian caught the man's hand mid hit and hurled him back at their ship. Zoro started to cut down the men pointing rifles left and right while the others engaged in a small fight. As this was going on, Genevieve, who had dodged most of the action to grab her paintbrush, looked at Luffy and saw a most terrifying sight:

Luffy truly angry.

Apparently, Steven saw the same thing and rushed over to the girl. "Genevieve, you can use your paint things to make people do stuff right?"

She nodded.

"I have a plan! We need to stop the fighting before somebody gets hurt really badly," he told her.

"They should have thought of that before they tried to hit you unprompted," she responded bitterly. To be truthful, she was amazed at just how angry she was getting at these random pirates. It wasn't like her...well the old her. She thought about looking deeper into it, but she dismissed the thought since it would be too much work.

"Well, can you do something like this?" Steven asked before explaining some long winded plan that required every ounce of concentration the former Miss Goldenweek had to comprehend.

"Okay," she nodded. She started mixing her paints to create her

Color Trap and then walked behind the giant man-hippo, who was taunting Luffy. It was clear that he was about to get the beating of his life and, as such, she was doing him a favor.

### **"Color Trap: Friendship Yellow Green!"**

The second the paint touched the man's body, his entire demeanor changed. He raised his hand and yelled "STOP MY MEN AT ONCE!" at the top of his lungs.

The fighting halted for a moment while the Straw Hats waited in anticipation. All eyes were on Wapol, Luffy, and her.

"Hey," she waved. "You don't want to keep fighting us anymore."

"You're right friend!" the hippo nodded eagerly. "You are so right!"

"WHAT?!" Wapol's men yelled out in horror and confusion.

"You want to go home and rethink your life."

"When you put it that way, I really do think that's a good idea," he tapped his finger to his jaw. "My men! We don't have time for this! We must return to Drum Kingdom at once!"

"Sire...don't you think that you are being rash?" a man with an afro and facial hair yelled.

Wapol picked him up and gave him a death glare. "Are you questioning your king Kuromarimo?!"

"You heard the king!" Kuromarimo yelled frantically. "We will continue back to the kingdom!"

As the pirates started scurrying off of the ship, Genevieve had one last idea. "Hey!"

"What's up buddy?" Wapol called back.

"WHY IS THE KING BEING SO INFORMAL WITH THAT LITTLE GIRL?!" the Wapol Pirates yelled.

"I'm cold. Do you have any spare jackets? About...," she started to count. "Ten of them? Two in my size?"

"Sure! Sure! You heard her men! To make up for our rudeness, we will give them our jackets!"

With increasing speed, the confused and fearful pirates provided the Straw Hats with the necessary jackets and waved goodbye. The Straw Hats just stared at each other and looked to Genevieve for an answer.

"I didn't know if you had jackets. I'm cold!" she complained.

"So you stopped our fight?" Zoro asked, clearly dejected.

"It was my idea!" Steven waved his hand. "We really don't need to fight guys! With Genevieve's powers, we can settle things peacefully."

Zoro and Sanji shot a look to Luffy, who was still angry at Wapol for invading his ship and attacking his crewman. The captain gave them a nod and walked over to Steven. "Steven, do you know what we are?"

"Pirates!"

"And do you know what pirates do?"

Steven nodded. "*Pillage and plunder and rifle and loot?*"

"Some do. Steven, not everyone is going to be as simple as that hippo guy. You need to know that fighting is what we do," Luffy explained. "To save Vivi's country, we are going to do a lot of fighting. People are going to get hurt."

The painter watched the boy look confused and tried to struggle with the concept of it. "But...but if we can do things peacefully..."

"Could that Jasper or Peridot be stopped by doing things peacefully?" Luffy reminded him. "We aren't Gems like you, but we are warriors just the same. Are you strong enough to take a life if you needed to?"



"I...I..."

"Think about it, Steven," Luffy pointed out to him.

The boy left the deck and went straight to his cabin. The second he was out of earshot, Genevieve got the courage to walk up to the Straw Hat captain. "What was that about?"

"Hmm?"

"That was mean!" she scolded him. "He's only a young kid!"

"Aren't you only a few years apart?" Luffy asked.

"I'm more mature than he is!"

"He still needs to know the stakes," Luffy simply said. "From what he's told us he's never fought a person before, only those Gem things. He could get hurt."

"I..." Genevieve started before the door opened again. Steven walked out, clearly trying to hide the fact that he was just crying. He came in between the two of them and stopped.

"You're right. I don't like fighting. It's bad and if it's not necessary, I don't think we should do it," Steven sniffled. "But to save Vivi's people...I know what I may have to do...but it doesn't mean I have to like it."

He closed his eyes for a moment and wiped away the last of his tears. "I need to get stronger...not even for this but to help the Gems when I get home. Can you help me?"

Luffy then adopted his famous dumb grin and patted the kid on the back. "Anything for my nakama! First things first: we need our doctor!"

Thankfully, the trip to the next island was shorter than Genevieve expected and they reached it by the middle of the next day. That entire time, Steven had been practicing his shields with Zoro, helping him form them faster and use them for offensive strikes. The painter was in the middle of sketching Steven throwing his shield at

Zoro with all of his might when they prepared to dock on the island.

Unfortunately for them, it seemed as if they would not be welcomed.  
Go figure.

"Stop right there, pirates!" the man who seemed to be the leader yelled to them. "You aren't welcome here! Turn right around!"

"No pirates allowed! Get away from our island!" one of the townspeople yelled.

"Can't you monsters leave us in peace?!" another cried.

The painter merely sighed. This was going to be predictable, wasn't it? The Straw Hats would make a plea and the town would no doubt let them...

"Please! We have a sick person on board! We just need a doctor! A..." Vivi, who had heard the noise and came out to help, started to beg before a townspeople pulled out a gun and fired at the girl.

As the bullet grazed her arm, Genevieve's eyes widened.  
'Well... THAT wasn't as predictable as...'

Her thought was interrupted by Luffy shouting at the top of his lungs  
"You bastards!"

The males of the crew readied themselves to begin their retaliation, including Steven, who looked conflictingly from Vivi to the villagers. However, he seemed to resolve himself to fight in her honor.

"No, Luffy!" Vivi pleaded from the floor. "The bullet only...grazed me! Think about what Steven said earlier! You don't need to resort to fighting at the first sign of trouble! What will this accomplish?! The sign of a good captain is to know whether to fight or not!"

She grabbed Luffy's leg and gave him a look. Then she yelled once more. "Please! We just need a doctor! One of our own is sick and near death! I beg you! Please help us!"

Luffy thought about it for a moment and gave a look to his crew then to the teenager bleeding out on his ship. Finally, he knelt down

beside her and shouted with the same conviction "Please help us! This is all my fault! We just need a doctor!"

One by one the pirates did the same thing, from Steven, who was relieved beyond belief to Sanji, who was holding everything back since he was seething with rage. As she joined them, Genevieve couldn't believe the lengths the princess was going to help a woman who tried to kill her.

'This crew...I'm not going to be that bored while I'm with them, will I?'

"Very well," the head of the villagers called to them. "But we must warn you: we only have one doctor in our kingdom and she's a witch!"

'Nope...definitely not going to be that bored for a long time.'

# The Avalanche

The island of snow was a beautiful sight to behold. The mountains and hills were covered head to toe with the stuff and Steven, being a stereotypical little kid, was naturally in heaven.

The crew had left the Going Merry docked with Zoro watching it by himself. He asked Damian and Steven if they wanted to stay and train with him, but both turned him down. While it was expected in Steven's case, the bomb man seemed rather protective of his former partner. It turned a few heads, specifically Sanji's, but they traveled out regardless.

As the head of the townspeople, Dalton, was explaining where to find the doctor that could help Petrea's condition, Steven was presently making snowmen with Usopp, Luffy, and Genevieve, who had been convinced to try to paint their frozen creations.

"My Snowzilla is going to utterly destroy yours, Luffy!" Usopp announced confidently.

"In your dreams!" Luffy stuck his tongue out at him. "Genevieve, can you color his head purple and his chest black?"

The painter got to work while Usopp started requesting his own color selection. Steven meanwhile, concentrated hard as he finished his snow person. He used his hand to finish drawing a face into the snow and merely smiled.

"Woah, Steven! That came out great!" Luffy said in amazement. "What do you call it?"

Steven just kept looking at the figure and wiped at his eyes for a moment. The snow person looked to be a figure with sunglasses and a giant afro. Just as he was about to answer, the other Straw Hats finally noticed their absence inside. "GET IN HERE YOU IDIOTS!"

"Ahh! Scary Nami!" Luffy, Usopp, Steven, and even the normally stoic Genevieve cried, running inside, leaving the three unfinished

snow people to guard the house.

Like three of the people Steven missed most.

\*AGITR\*

Garnet sneezed without warning, allowing her to be hit by a robotic alien creature.

"Garnet, what are you doing?!" Pearl called out from her own fight.  
"You had that thing cornered!"

"It...it was nothing!" the Gem shook it off. "These things are nothing compared to the likes of Peridot's abominations!"

"Do not under estimate the forces of Aku strange alien woman!" the samurai, whose fight they interrupted in their later trip through the Belly Bag Badge, yelled while engaging his own enemy. "If we are to survive this fight, we need to be focused...and Samurai Jack is always focused!"

With that, he used his sword to slice the beast in half and went to join Connie's fight, passing by Greg, who had kept himself hidden.

"Next place that we see that has a sword, I'm getting one," he was muttering aloud.

'Steven...I know I just felt you,' Garnet thought to herself. She punched her opponent away from her and tried yet again to look into the future. Sadly, all she could see was snow and a desert. 'We won't give up...' "We won't! Ha!"

Using her rage, she jumped back in to defeat all the enemies in their path. The sooner they were taken care of, the sooner their quest could resume.

\*AGITR\*

Inside the small house, the pirates and Dalton were huddled around Petrea, who was placed in the bed. She was bundled up and shivering. Steven couldn't help but notice that Sanji and Damian were at either side of her exchanging glances.

"See that castle up there?" Dalton pointed to a small building on the highest mountain in the distance. "That's where Dr. Kureha lives."

"How convenient," Sanji sighed. "So, how does one go about calling her?"

"You don't. She comes down when she wants to and heals people as she goes along. She's a wonderful doctor, especially for being 140 years old, but incredibly eccentric," Dalton explained.

"HOW IS SHE STILL ALIVE?!" Nami yelled.

"The Gems are over 5,000 years old!" Steven chimed in. "Maybe she's an alien too!"

"I DON'T THINK SHE'S AN ALIEN!" the navigator retorted.

"So how does she get down here then?" Damian asked. "Fly? Devil Fruit?"

"A reindeer pulled sled actually," Dalton admitted. "That's what everyone says at least, hence the witch moniker."

"That sounds like the Joyful Seasonal Plum from the *Crying Breakfast Friend Winter Jubilee*!" Steven's eyes widened. "He would come down and stop all the other Crying Breakfast Friends from crying just for one day and..." He stopped his excitement when he realized that he was just confusing everyone.

"...'Crying...Breakfast...Friends?'" Dalton asked. "I can't say that I follow."

"...yeah, sorry. My bad," Steven said dejectedly. "So...how long until the doctor comes from her castle?"

"She comes and goes of her own free will. There's no telling when she will come down."

Luffy assed the situation for a moment and decided upon the best course of action: slapping the slumbering Petrea in the face. "Yo! Get up!"

Both Sanji and Damian went to lunge at Luffy before Steven instinctively put up a bubble around the three. "WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING?!"

"What...what...?" Petrea managed to get out.

"The doctor is on top of a mountain. I'm going to carry you there."

"WHAT?!" everyone in the house yelled.

"That will just make it worse! She can't handle the extreme weather out there!" Nami tried explaining.

"Please reconsider! You don't know how cold it can get out there!" Dalton added.

"I can help!" Steven rose his hand. He then clapped his hands and his bubble appeared from his gem. "My bubble can keep the cold out!"

The boy looked to his captain, who nodded. "What do you say, Petrea? Can you handle it?"

"We'll...have to try, won't we?" she smiled weakly. "Guess my...my life is in your hands, Straw Hat."

"And mine!" Damian grunted, walking forward. "I'm not letting you guys go up there alone!"

"Well it's a good thing I'll be with them, so don't worry about it!" Sanji interjected, giving Damian the evil eye. "I would rather die than let a beautiful woman go up the mountain without a PROPER escort!"

The former Mr. 5 got in his face. "What do you mean by 'proper?!'"

"I think you understood perfectly well shithead!"

"Cursing!" Steven cried.

"Look, if you are all going to be idiots and not think it through, why don't you just both go?" Usopp groaned in disbelief. "Engaging in a match of egos isn't going to help Petrea, is it?"

"Fine!" they both looked away from each other.

Steven turned his head from Sanji to Damian before realization struck. "You have a crush!" He told them both in a sing song voice.

"SHUT UP!" they yelled in unison.

\*AGITR\*

"Ahhhhhhhh!" Steven yelled. "I feel like my mind is on fire!"

After strapping Petrea to Luffy's back (and been given a lowdown of the local area by Dalton), Steven had formed his bubble around the five of them and they started off. However, Steven had not anticipated the fast speeds Luffy was running at. As such, the boy and the two men were forced to keep on their toes and, in the case of Steven, keep complete concentration.

"You're doing great, Steven!" Luffy laughed, picking up the pace. "We will get there in no time!"

"I hope so!" Steven cried frantically. "How are you two?"

"I feel like a small rodent!" Damian grumbled and he tried to keep his footing.

Sanji merely laughed. "Please! I'm handling this like a pro! I'm...oof!" They had hit a bump, causing Sanji to hit the wall of the bubble.

"You were saying eyebrows?" Damian laughed at his misfortune before falling on his face as well. The two men growled at each other before scrambling up, making sure not to be carried away with the ball.

"Don't hit the walls guys! It's hard to keep it together!"

As Luffy's speed increased, so did Petrea's breathing. The males knew it was better not to acknowledge it and to keep moving along. In order to keep himself focused, Steven did what he did best: he sang.

*"Sleigh bells ring, are you listening? In the lane, snow is glistening!"*



*A beautiful sight; we're happy tonight! Walking in a winter wonderland!"*

"STOP SINGING!" Sanji and Damian yelled at the same time.

"Wait!" Petrea managed to get out. "I...I like...I like the singing..."

"Steven, what are you doing?!" Sanji admonished him.

"How could you be so rude as to stop singing! You need lessons in etiquette kid!" Damian added.

Steven looked confused before finally figuring it out. "Is that your dream, Damian?! Do you want to marry Petrea?"

"NO THAT IS NOT MY DREAM! STOP ASKING!"

"I don't get it. Where did you get that idea from?" Luffy asked, clueless as ever.

"Just...just stop," Damian pleaded.

After some time (and many more snow related songs), they came across a tiny white rabbit. Steven started to coo. "Aww, look at the bunny! It is adorable!"

It was then that the bunny decided to bare its fangs and started to lunge for the ball. "Ahh! Bad bunny! Run away!"

"No, run at it!" Luffy said, taking control. The bubble ball hit the creature and sent it flying away. However it shortly proved to have been a mistake as older, larger bunnies arrived. The crew kept on going past them but in their anger, they started hopping up and down.

Thus began an avalanche.

"AHHH! WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO?!" Steven cried. "WE ARE GOING TO BE TRAPPED!"

"If you act like that, then we will!" Luffy smirked. "We just got to plow through it!"

"ARE YOU CRAZY?!" the three conscious people yelled at once.

"Look! There's a cliff!" Sanji pointed. "If we stay under there, we might get lucky!"

The group scurried toward the aforementioned cliff, but it was no use: they could not escape the avalanche. However, the cliff proved to be a good call, as it allowed the ball to ride the top of the snow as opposed to being buried underneath.

But they were not the only ones who could ride the snowfall.

"These rabbits just don't quit do they?!" Sanji freaked out when more of the creatures came at them.

"What did Dalton call them? Laphans? Lapins?" Luffy tried to remember.

"Lapis?" Steven offered.

"How are you so calm during an avalanche?!" Damian wondered.

Before anyone could answer, the rabbits started to attack the bubble. At long last, Steven's will gave out and his protective barrier shattered. Everybody started flying in various directions.

The problem was Petrea. The second the cold air hit her nose, she started to cough again. With a single loud burst, she flew all the way in the air, snapping the binding that tied her to Luffy. With her weight constantly changing, she started to float away much to the fear of the men, who now had to deal with the lapahns directly.

"Luffy! Steven! Get her back down here!" Sanji yelled. "Shithead and I will stop these damn rabbits!"

"Wait...what?!" Steven cried, taking everything in at once.

"Go get her, kid!" Damian picked his nose and flung it at the lapahns. "We've got this!"

In an instant, the two men and the rabbits engaged in combat and we lost in a sea of white. All that was left flying Luffy, Steven, and

the near out of sight Petrea.

"SANJI! BOMB GUY!" Luffy yelled. "WHY DID YOU DO THAT?!"

"Luffy, we need to get her down! Can you stretch to her?!" Steven asked worryingly.

"I can't! She's too far! Can't you send her in a bubble or something?!"

Steven concentrated with all of his might, but he could not produce a bubble large enough to surround her. As such, Luffy and Steven were now encased in a bubble, flying in the exact opposite direction.

"What are we going to do?!" Luffy panicked.

"Wait..." Realization dawned on Steven. "Grab my hands!"

"Why?"

"Throw me over there and I'll bubble her myself!" the half-Gem was determined.

Luffy nodded and grabbed him. As the two were falling, their hearts and wills were both in the same place. Their desire to save Petrea was strong and etched into their minds. It seemed like the two were in sync.

Then Steven's gem began to glow and the two beings were encased in light.

# The Climb Up The Mountain

At the edge of the wintry island, a very large, most familiar ship docked not too far from the Going Merry. Disembarking and clearing a path, the Wapol Pirates made themselves known by killing every single townsperson waiting and guarding the dock. The man himself left his ship while riding a giant hippo, laughing all the way. "My beloved Drum Kingdom! Your king has returned! Why would you fire upon us? All I want to do is play king again!"

"My lord..." Chess worked up the courage to talk. "The kingdom appears to be in good shape. What would you like us to do?"

"I already told you! I want to go home and rethink my life!" Wapol argued. "Why is that so hard for you and Kuromarimo to understand?"

"Well, Your Majesty, you never had those thoughts until you had that paint mark on your back," the mustachioed man brought up. "If you would just let us..."

"No! Only the king may touch the royal wardrobe! Let us make our way to the castle!"

A random underling took the moment to run over to the king of Drum Island. "Your Majesty! I have an urgent report! It's the pirates from yesterday! Their ship is docked by the river!"

"What?! If this were the old me I would execute them all on sight...but the priority is to return to the castle! I will think about their fates there! Does anyone have any objections?!"

"No, sir! We would never question you, King Wapol!"

\*AGITR\*

Petrea was afraid.

She knew that she was in trouble the second the bubble popped. This was always an issue for her since she ate her Devil Fruit. The

power to change her weight was an interesting ability on its own, but the ramifications of it being out of control was not one she had considered initially. The first time it happened, she nearly destroyed the restaurant she was working at.

Damian knew, of course, that it was a problem the second the two started working with each other. Given the variety of places Mr. O sent them, getting sick was inevitable. Thankfully, he had come across a set of sea stone ropes and had used them to tie her down to her bed. Though they made her weak, it was better than accidentally destroying their ship with a roaring cough. Unfortunately, those ropes had been left in Little Garden.

The former Miss Valentine saw her partner and her new cooking companion attack the rabbit creatures and her heart sank. 'If I am responsible for them being frozen to death, I will never forgive myself.' Admittedly, Petrea had been in a bit of a self-hating mood since joining up with the Straw Hats, but that was due to her dealing with her own demons. She knew Damian was hurting the same way, hence his training with Zoro.

Thankfully, she seemed to brighten up whenever Steven was with her. There was something about the boy that Petrea couldn't quite put her finger on, but he always knew just what to say to get her to appreciate herself just a bit more. The boy was one of the most optimistic people she had ever met and while she formerly dismissed it as being childish, even the hardened killer had to express a feeling of refreshment at the changes in her life.

This feeling doubled when the Straw Hat himself offered her a chance to right her wrongs with his crew. How had she gone from mocking optimism to embracing it? Why was she lucky enough to know people who would look past her flaws and assist her at the risk of their own life?

As the impending doom of being lost in a snow storm sunk in, Petrea noticed a pink light in the distance. The light's glow started out low...then it started to grow. It took her a moment to realize that this light was actually from both Steven and Luffy.

What the hell was going on over there?

The light faded almost immediately and her heart sank. It seemed like Steven had vanished and Luffy was the only person left in sight. Had the boy been swallowed whole by the storm? However, it dawned on her that the figure in the distance wasn't exactly Luffy either. His hair was poofier, almost like Steven's. He seemed to be wearing Luffy's red vest...but it looked like Steven's star was on it too? What had happened to the jackets they were wearing?

It was only then did she remember what Steven had pled in Little Garden: *"Now's she's stuck fused at the bottom of our ocean with Jasper and there's nothing I can do to help her, especially when I'm stuck here in this world!"*

'Is...is THAT fusion?!' she thought before the shock of the situation took over her. Once again, she had passed out and started to plummet to the snowy surface below.

\*AGITR\*

Luffy and Steven both saw the rapidly falling figure of Petrea in the distance and started to panic.

"Okay, are you ready to throw me?" Steven asked him before stopping to realize something. "Wait...this isn't my voice..."

"Where are you, Steven?!" the same voice cried out. "I can hear you but I can't see...wait...this isn't my voice either!"

Luffy and Steven both went to feel their face when they realized they were doing everything in sync. The being blinked rapidly before knowing exactly what had just happened. "I fused with Luffy! Wait...fusion? What's fusion? How do I know what fusion is?" the fusion talked aloud.

It was then that Petrea snapped him out of it. There were only mere moments before she would crash and undoubtedly become lost in the snow drift. Thankfully, the Steven-Luffy hybrid knew exactly what to do:

**"GUM GUM QUARTZ BUBBLE!"**

The fusion's arm stretched out as far as it could go. Closer and

close it got to the woman's still yet falling body. As it reached closer, the fusion's stomach began to glow and the light traveled all the way through the outstretched hand. Like a burst of energy, the pink light surrounded Petrea and shielded her once more. The hand then did the same thing to the ground that Petrea was about to hit, causing the bubble to bounce in the air once more.

**"GUM GUM QUARTZ CATAPULT!"** the fusion yelled.

The hybrid now curled up its legs into a coil and somehow willed the shield to throw them in the air, this time to the area where Petrea was hurtling. Now that she was properly in range, he stretched his arms out once more and grabbed the ball, dragging it back to his body. The second it returned, the fusion dissipated the bubble and formed a new one around the three...two of them.

By this point, the avalanche had concluded. The bubble landed on the top of the snow and the fusion finally had a moment to appreciate itself.

"So...so we merged together...that is so amazing?! How did we do that Steven?" the fusion asked itself. "Well I've only ever fused before with Connie...so this is pretty new to me! But why did we fuse?"

The fusion thought it over before glancing at the slumbering woman in their arms. It all clicked instantly. "Our compassion for our friends! Of course! Fusion is all about emotions and feelings! It all makes sense! I guess this makes us...Lufven? Stuffy? No...Lufven," the fusion smiled. "That's a cool name! I...WAIT WHERE ARE SANJI AND DAMIAN?" Lufven slapped himself on the back of the head. "We need to find them! No...I need to find them!"

After a few moments of searching, Luufven came across an interesting sight: the baby lapahn from earlier digging in the snow. "Did...did your parents get caught in the avalanche?"

The bunny started to growl defensively, but the Luffy-Steven hybrid merely dropped the shield and pulled out the shivering form of the adult lapahn. "I know how it's like to lose the people you care about. Take care of them."

He examined the landscape until he noticed two sets of shoes sticking out from the ground. Lufven rolled over and pulled out Sanji and Damian. They were battered, bruised, and weak from the frozen landscape.

"My friends...I need to get them to the castle...fast!" the fusion told himself. Using his increased strength, he wrapped his arms around the two of them and retied Petrea to his back. Then with the speed of two people, they flew fast in the snow.

Along the way, they came across a procession of people were walking through the tundra. The largest and most recognizable one was King Wapol riding on his noble hippo steed. He turned his head over to the oncoming fusion. "Look men! A giant pink ball is heading our way! Maybe we can use it to get through the snow faster!" The oblivious king waved his hands. "Hey! Stop! In the name of the king, I demand you to..."

Wasting no time to talk, the pink sphere plowed through the people, knocking Wapol off of his ride. The king fell into the snow, soaking his clothes along with his body. His loyal aides, Chess and Kuromarimo, immediately pulled him out. Instantly, they noticed that the paint mark from before had finally been wiped clean.

"Sire! Your clothes!"

"You idiot! Why didn't you wipe my clothes earlier?!" Wapol roared. "I was clearly under that painter's spell! My first new law as the returning king is to execute any and every painter in our kingdom! My second is to kill every person who bowls over the king! I want that Straw Hat bastard dead!"

Wapol's men loaded their rifles and started to run after their targets, but were immediately ambushed by the lapahn tribe from before. "What are you doing in my way?! Move now!"

"Sir, it seems as if they are trying to block us from the Straw Hat!" Chess cried out in shock.

"Impossible! You can't tame these beasts! They hate humans! Men, let the slaughter begin!"



\*AGITR\*

"Retreat! Retreat!" Wapol called to his men after a few moments of fighting the killer rabbits. "We will find another way to the castle!"

\*AGITR\*

The sphere containing Lufven and his friends finally made it to the mountain where the castle stood. Panting, Lufven stared up.

"This...this fusion is taking everything out of me. We...I need to be strong enough to get up there."

Creating a pink bubble at the base of the mountain, Lufven prepared himself to jump. However, a thought struck him. "Wait...if I don't make it up, everyone will get hurt! I can't risk that!"

He weighed his options and realized there was only one thing to do: climb the mountain by hand. Stretching his arms and tying them in knots around Damian and Sanji while also securing Shanks' famous straw hat, the fusion started to climb. He had to be very careful. Every movement of his arms could cause someone to fall. Petrea was secured and knocked out on his back while the two men kept being pulled up and down with each arm as it climbed. If he did not keep his intense concentration, they would break apart into Steven and Luffy, damning everyone to a snowy grave.

Hours passed as he climbed. His body was near frozen, his knuckles bloody and bruised. A normal person surely would have died by this point. But Lufven was no ordinary person. As a fusion of two beings with immense will, determination, and optimism, there was no stopping him from reaching his task.

At long last, the fusion reached the top. The castle was a marvel to behold. Towers reached high into the sky and the windows were covered in a layer of ice and snow. It was something out of a fairy tale. Untying his charges, Lufven smiled and weakly cried "Doctor...!" before collapsing into the snow.

Unfortunately, the snow the fusion collapsed into was unstable and Lufven began to drop down the side of the mountain that he forced himself up by sheer willpower alone. Thankfully for him, a large furry

creature grabbed him and pulled him up. It appeared as if he were a yeti wearing a hat. The eyes of Lufven weakly opened and turned into stars with a skull and crossbones inside of them. "A...a Wookiee!"

Then he collapsed once more into the beast's hands. The creature jumped back in shock. "Ahh! Doctor! Doctor! Come quick!"

An elderly woman wearing sunglasses and a short sleeved shirt walked out and chugged a bit from her bottle of sherry. "What's this, Chopper? Guests at this hour?"

The creature, who turned into a miniature reindeer, started dragging the near frozen bodies into the castle. "They climbed the side of the mountain, Doctor Kureha! This one did it with his own bare hands!"

"What?!" she said in an awestruck voice. "Drum Rock is more than 5,000 meters high! How is that even possible?!" The doctor bent over and examined Lufven. "This is the worst case of frostbite I have ever seen. We need to run a hot bath immediately!"

"What about them, doctor?" Chopper asked, pointing to the unconscious forms of Sanji and Damian. "It looks like they broke a lot of ribs and the blond-haired one's backbone is broken! May I please treat them?"

Before Doctor Kureha could answer, she spied the still form of Petrea beside the others. She turned over her neck and grimaced. "This one takes priority! She's been infected with a disease from another island. We need antibiotics now!"

Just as the doctor was about to lift Petrea up, Lufven managed to pick himself up to look at his saviors. "Kid, what are you doing?! You are going to die if you keep pushing yourself like this!"

"C...can y...ou save th..them?" Lufven managed to get out.

"Of course I can! I'm the best damn doctor on this island, and the cutest too!" she laughed. "Chopper and I will take care of everything."

Lufven started to laugh. "Shihashihashiha! Then...then I did...it!"

With that, the fusion glowed brightly and revealed the bloody and bruised forms of Steven and Luffy. Both shared the same injuries and both were now out like a light.

Chopper jumped back in shock and pointed his hoof at them.  
"Did...did you see that doctor?! What happened?!"

"It's simple, Chopper...they did everything they could for their friends," she smiled. "Get them inside. We've got work to do!"

# The Blue-Nosed Reindeer

Steven opened his eyes very carefully. He rubbed his head and started to moan. "Ugh...I shouldn't have taken that left turn at Albuquerque...what happened to me?"

The half-Gem started to look himself over and noticed all of the bruises and cuts. "Ahh! What are these?! I don't remember getting hit this bad...or even fighting at all!"

Suddenly, memories of the past day flooded Steven's mind. His eyes widened, despite the pain it was causing. "Did I...did we...?"

On cue, the door to his room flew open and Monkey D. Luffy practically jumped onto the bed so hard that Steven nearly flew off of it. He was covered with nearly identical bruises, but one couldn't tell from how easily he was moving about. They didn't affect him at all.

Bringing up the rear were Sanji and Damian, both of whom were bandaged up around the waist. Unsurprisingly, Sanji had managed to light a cigarette, but how any survived the avalanche was beyond Steven's comprehension. He had made his dislike of the smell and smoke well known, but he was technically their guest and Pearl taught him that he should respect the rules of the house...err ship.

"STEVEN! YOU'VE GOT TO TELL ME HOW WE DID THAT!" Luffy yelled.

"Ahh! Not too loud!" Steven covered his ears. "Wait! You guys are okay!"

"Please, a few scratches can't stop someone like me!" Sanji smirked. "Now spill the beans, kid."

"What?"

Damian smacked his hand on the bed for dramatic effect. "Is what he's saying true?!"

"I don't know..."

"IT WAS SO COOL! WE FUSED TOGETHER GUYS!" Luffy was more excited than Steven had ever seen. "HOW WAS THAT EVEN POSSIBLE?!"

Steven's jaw dropped. "You...you mean I didn't dream it? We actually fused?!"

Luffy nodded his head eagerly. Sanji and Damian exchanged looks. "What exactly IS fusing? You mean to say that you two became...a hybrid or something?" Sanji asked.

"Well..." Steven tried to choose his words carefully. "Fusing is the deepest connection a Gem can have with another Gem. If two Gems are in really...um...if they are focused and in tune with each other..."

"You aren't making any sense at all," Damian sighed.

"If two Gems really care about each other, they can dance together and become one giant person!" Steven figured it out. "Yeah! That's it! But since I'm half-Gem, I can fuse with regular humans...and I guess humans who ate Devil Fruit!"

"If two Gems really care for each other?" Damian blinked.

"Dance?" Sanji gave Luffy and Steven a disgusted look.

"Yeah! It was awesome!" Luffy smiled.

The two men shivered and looked back at the two innocent souls on the bed. "Does...does that not sound like ANYTHING to you, Luffy?"

He shook his head. "What part?"

'He's hopeless,' the two silently agreed.

"Still, I've only ever fused with Connie," Steven told them. "This was my first time with another..."

"JUST STOP!" Sanji and Damian yelled.

"...person beside her!" Steven finished before looking confused. "What? Was it something I said?"

"Are we just that terrible?" Sanji asked.

"Our minds are clearly in the gutter," Damian groaned.

\*AGITR\*

In a bed in another room, Petrea stirred awake. "A bed? How did I get to a bed? I...hmm?"

She looked down and noticed that she was bound by sea stone rope. It was not too tight or too restricting, but it appeared that it had seen a bit of a struggle to put on. She cocked her up and saw a crack in the ceiling. Thankfully, it seemed she did not cause any other damage to the unfamiliar room.

"Well, that's a positive thing. Still I wonder where these sea stone ropes came from," she thought to herself. The chocolatier tried to sit up but the power of the rope caused her to slump back down. "I guess I'm stuck here for a while."

It was then that she looked over at the doorway and saw a most interesting sight: a blue-nosed reindeer wearing a hat. It was holding itself on the door and was staring intently at her.

"Hello there, little guy! Did...did you help me get here?" Petrea asked.

"ACK!" the reindeer gasped. "YOU SAW ME?! I WAS PERFECTLY HIDDEN!"

"...but...but you are hiding the wrong way," Petrea pointed out. The reindeer blinked and immediately tried to rectify his mistake. "...there is no use trying to change it. I already know you are there."

"Hush, human!" the reindeer said angrily. "Are...are you feeling any better?"

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING, CHOPPER?!" an elderly voice called from behind the reindeer. "GO CHECK ON THE OTHERS!"

The reindeer jumped and ran away, leaving an elderly woman wearing short clothes and sunglasses alone with Petrea. Undecided

if she was worried or confused, Petrea figured it was better to stay quiet for the present moment to gauge the situation.

"Ah, the girlie who would have brought the house down if I wasn't prepared is awake!" the woman laughed as she drank her drink. "Let's feel your forehead."

She put a single finger to Petrea's head before she could try to react. "Hmm...not too bad. It's getting better, but you still need more rest."

"Who...who might you be?" Petrea coughed.

"Me?" she smiled. "My name is Doctor Kureha, but you may call me Doctorine. And no, I will not tell you the secret to my youthful beauty!"

"...I didn't ask about that..." Petrea shook her head. "Um...is there any way you can remove..."

"Oh, that's right. You can't touch those can you?" She started to untie the ropes very gingerly. "Outside of Chopper, you are the first Devil Fruit user I have treated in quite some time. I mean, Dalton has his abilities, but he is very rarely sick..."

"Devil Fruit? So that reindeer...?"

The doctor hit her on the back of the head. Petrea went to rub the bruised spot. "WHAT KIND OF A DOCTOR HITS HER PATIENTS?!"

"Think, girlie! That was a talking reindeer! We aren't exactly that far into the Grand Line. Those kinds of things are not that common here!"

The woman sighed and took another swig of her drink. "He accidentally came across a Human Human Fruit. Go figure. He was already an outcast to his own people thanks to his blue nose, but now he's got nobody but me. The only other person who cared for him was a fake doctor who died some years ago."

"But enough about that," she dismissed the memory. Kureha moved

her hands from the ropes to Petrea's neck and examined the bug bite. "I have to say; how you got this must have been an interesting tale. This is a bite from a Kestia bug. Its venoms typically start affecting a person after five days. You are lucky that you came my way."

"Why?"

"Because Kestias have been extinct for years! Where the hell did you come from? Prehistoric times?!" Kureha took off her glasses. "The important thing is that you got here when you did. If you wasted even two more days, you'd have been as dead as a doornail."

The shock of realizing how close to death she nearly was startled Petrea. "I...I was going to die?"

"Unfortunately. Thankfully your idiot friends managed to get you to me in time..."

For all of the self-loathing Petrea was feeling, this sudden brush with death caused her to realize how little she wanted to die. 'This just proves it. I need to stop hating myself and start focusing on what matter most, like helping Vivi and...' "Steven! Straw Hat! Damian! Sanji!" the former Miss Valentine panicked aloud. She looked around and saw no trace of them. "Where...where are they?!"

"Calm down, you ninny, or else you'll get sick again!" the doctor hit her once more, much to Petrea's chagrin. "Your friends are resting in the room next door...though I think I heard them running around before. No manners at all."

"Steven could use some lessons in etiquette," Pretrea admitted. "Wait, Steven! Were...how many people came up the mountain?"

Kureha raised her eyebrow and chuckled. "It seems like you are just as confused about that as I was. The two black-haired punks...how did they do that?"

"So I wasn't just imagining things," Petrea gasped. "They...they fused!"



"Fused?" Kureha scoffed. "I'd say it was unprecedented, but Devil Fruits can do strange things these days...like add rocks to belly buttons I suppose."

The chocolatier chuckled a bit. "No, it's not like that at all. Steven...well Steven...he's kind of special..."

"Backstory? Not interested," she dismissed her. "Now you get some rest! You still have at least ten days before I can clear you out of here."

Petrea's eyes widened. "Ten days?! But I feel so much better! We need to get back on our path to Alabasta! I need to make up for..."

"Again, I don't care about your story. All I care about is your health. There are two ways you will leave this room, girlie: with a clean bill of health or in a body bag. Take your pick, or would you rather I use the ropes again?"

\*AGITR\*

"So you're telling me you both were so focused on saving us that your wills LITERALLY merged together," Sanji asked, still trying to figure out just how this happened.

"Well, yeah!" Steven nodded. He knew that it was a hard concept to understand, but he thought he explained it well enough. "We care for you guys!"

Damian punched Steven and Luffy in their already bruised shoulders. "Damn kid."

"What was that for?!" the half-Gem asked. "That hurt!"

"For caring too much, you idiots! You could have died and Petrea would have killed us!"

"You could have...WHAT IS THAT?!" Steven excitedly pointed to the door.

The males followed Steven's line of sight and saw Chopper, the blue-nosed reindeer, peeking in at them. Luffy's mouth started to

salivate. "FOOD!"

"What?!" Steven jumped back. "No! You can't..."

"Now that you mention it," Damian patted his stomach. "I haven't eaten in hours. I could use some food."

"Reindeer stew, anyone?" Sanji eyed the beast eagerly.

The reindeer started to back up away from them and ran away. The Straw Hats and Damian started right after him. "GET THAT MEAT!"

"Nooooo! Don't hurt him!" Steven jumped out of the bed and his eyes started to water due to the pain. "Gah! No! I can't stop! COME BACK, LITTLE REINDEER! OW! OW! OW!" He ran as fast as he could to stop his friends from hurting the innocent creature.

He saw them running right past a vaguely familiar older woman and Steven came to a sudden halt, tripping onto the floor in a pratfall. "Petrea! You look great!"

"Kid!" the old woman said shocked. "Who let you out of bed?! You still look terrible!"

Petrea just kept staring at the boy. Steven felt himself blush, even though it hurt to do so. "Why are you staring at me like that?"

"How can I not stare at you?! You are covered head to toe in cuts and bruises! You should listen to the doctor!" Petrea tried to cover her shock and adopted a stern tone. "Stop worrying about me and get to bed!"

"But they are gonna eat the reindeer! I have to save him!" Steven looked conflicted between staying with her and going after Luffy. Finally, his heart told him what to do. "Okay! I've got to go! I'll be back! Bye bye!" he rapidly spoke, running back toward the reindeer with the pink hat.

Petrea just blinked and stared at Kureha. The doctor merely chuckled and took a long drink. "I can see what you mean about those etiquette lessons. Time to give them some lessons of my own."

Kureha got up and cracked her knuckles. At that moment, Petrea did not envy Luffy or the others. This was one woman not to be messed with.

\*AGITR\*

Chopper ran as fast as he could away from the salivating human garbage that was chasing him. He was used to people calling him a monster and ostracizing him, but being confused as food was a new one. These humans were just like all the others beside Doctorine and the dearly departed Doctor Hiriluk: careless and mean.

Still, the reindeer was intrigued. The two black-haired humans started out as one person and became two. Were they always two people who turned into one occasionally or a single person who accidentally became two? The medical work he and Doctorine did on them did nothing to answer that question but it piqued Chopper's medical curiosity. Did this have to do with that weird rock on the one human's stomach? Was it just a Devil Fruit power?

The other thing that surprised him was a conversation he overheard between Doctorine and the humans. She had caught up to them and started to scold them about their foolish choice to leave their beds. The one with the rock in his stomach apologized a lot, but the one with the hat asked the Doctorine to join his pirate crew! Pirates: just like Doctor Hiriluk always admired! He was close to finding these humans to be a bit better than the rest, but they had managed to see through his perfect hiding spot and started up the chase again.

There were so many questions he wanted to ask, but survival took priority at this point.

He managed to double back around to the room where the sick Devil Fruit user and the Doctorine were. He tried to back away before the strange human woman noticed him. He was one with the room. Silent.

"Oh, it's you again!" the woman miraculously noticed him. How could this be?!

"AHH!" he tried hiding once more. There was no way she would find

him now! 'Ha! Take that, human!'

"...you aren't very good at hiding, are you?" she chuckled. "Why don't you come out? Doctor Kureha told me you helped out with my treatment."

'What? Doctorine told her that?' "...you...you aren't afraid of me?"

"Kyahaha! How could I be afraid of a cute little thing like you?" she smiled. "I'm Petrea. Your name is Tony Tony Chopper, right?"

The reindeer backed away in surprise before regaining composure. This "Petrea" must not know how the compliment really made him feel. "Shut up, you bastard! What gives you the right to call me cute?"

"...you are an odd one, aren't you?" Petrea smirked. "So, what made you want to be a doctor?"

"I...I just want to help end all diseases! It's what I've wanted for the past five years!" Chopper did not want to talk about Doctor Hiriluk to this "Petrea," but he did want to ask her something. "...are...are you really a pirate?"

The blonde-haired woman's eyes widened and seemed to think about it. "Well...everyone else kind of is. I'm more...more of a guest than anything. But for the present moment: yes. Yes, I am a Straw Hat."

There was something about the way that she said it that caused Chopper to become intrigued. She seemed to be affirming something deep in herself...something she was struggling with internally. 'Did...did I just help her?!'

"'Straw Hat?' Is that your pirate group?"

She nodded. "The one with the black hair trying to eat you is the idiot captain. Give him time. I haven't known him for very long, but he can be carried away by both his sense of loyalty and, seemingly, his stomach."

"He scares me," Chopper admitted. "So if you are a pirate that

means you have a Jolly Roger? A skull and crossbones?!"

"That we do. A skull with a straw hat on it. Who would have guessed? Kyahahaha!" she laughed at her own joke. "So, you're a cute little talking reindeer doctor who likes pirates? That's quite a resume."

"Shut up, you asshole!"

"You know, they could use you..." Petrea paused and corrected herself. "We could use you. What do you say? If Straw Hat asks you, which I know he will the second he realizes you can talk, why don't you join up with us?"

"What? What does that mean? Does she...does she...?" "Join up... as a pirate?"

"That's what I said! Straw Hat was an idiot not to get a doctor by this point. You would make my time on the ship more bearable and secure. So, what do you think?"

Before he could answer her, the door flew open and the terrible trio of humans entered in. The one with the straw hat pointed at him and yelled "THE MEAT! GET HIM!"

"With pleasure, captain!" the blond-haired man rubbed his hands together.

Chopper gave a quick assessment of the situation and realized there was only option left: "RUN AWAY!"

He started to run but something caused him to stop in his tracks: the boy with the rock in his stomach had managed to cut in front of him and put his arms around him.

"No! No eating the cute reindeer!" he stood his ground. Then he paused and looked at him. "Wait...did...did you just talk?!"

"WHAT?! HE CAN TALK?!" Luffy clapped his hands eagerly. "WHY DIDN'T YOU SAY SO BEFORE?!"

"You didn't give me a chance!" Chopper argued. "I'm a doctor, not

food, you idiots!"

The reindeer looked into the eyes of the young boy and was surprised to see that his irises had literal stars in them. "Ah! What are those?! Are you sick?!"

"You are the cutest thing I have ever seen!" Steven whispered while his cheeks turned rosy from blushing. "You are adorable! My name is Steven and I'm sorry for my crew mates."

The blond-haired man and the man with the sunglasses stared at each other. "So...so we aren't getting food?"

"DAMIAN! SANJI!" Petrea weakly rose out of the bed.

"What is she doing?!" Chopper thought to himself. "Get back in bed, Petrea! You aren't rested enough! If Doctorine comes back in, she will restrain you with the sea stone rope!"

"I will sit back down after I give these two knuckleheads what they deserve for attacking a friend of mine, especially after he used his medical skills to get us back to health!" She cracked her knuckles and the two men began to cower in fear...though it seemed like the blond-haired man was also excited at the same time.

'Wait...what did she say?'

"Oh my gosh, Luffy! He's a doctor AND a cute talking reindeer! He needs to join the crew!" Steven jumped up and down. "Please Mr. Talking Reindeer? Please? Please? Please!"

"Steven!" Luffy folded his arms. "I am the captain and I will decide who to ask to join the crew."

Chopper did not know what to expect. Did he do something to upset the Straw Hat pirate? Was he going to call him a monster like all the others? Was he...

"Reindeer guy!" he smiled. "Join my crew!"

'What? Does he really...I can't! I can't! I CAN'T!'

"I...I can't be...I CAN'T BE YOUR FRIEND!" Chopper cried and ran away.

This was all too much for the reindeer. He had been so set in his ways to hate people. It was people like Wapol that killed the only other person who had been nice to him. It was people who called him a monster. This didn't make sense.

'Why do these people want to be nice to me?'

# The Snow Angel

Back in the town of Big Horn, the community was busy digging the poor buildings out from the snow. The avalanche had completely engulfed the town's houses and even the people, but thankfully it seemed that nobody was hurt. The Straw Hats proceeded to assist in any way they could. Nami and Vivi followed Dalton's lead but two members of the crew were less helpful at the present moment.

"They've been gone too long," Usopp started to pace around. "We have no way of knowing how it is going up there or even if they survived that avalanche! Usopp the Brave will climb the mountain to get to them! Who's with me?!"

"It's Luffy," Nami rolled her eyes. "If you don't think he survived that then clearly you don't have any faith in our captain."

"It's not right I tell you!" Usopp crossed his arms. "I know we need a doctor and all, but Petrea is really causing us to risk a lot for one!"

Nami frowned. "You're just mad at her for beating you up back at Little Garden."

"Well forgive me for not being entirely trusting!" he yelled. "I know she's trying to make up for everything that she did under Baroque Works, but you can't just change in one night!"

He then pointed over to the small teenager painting near Dalton's house and shook his head. "I mean look at Genevieve! She hasn't lifted a finger to help with the snow!"

"To be fair, she's famous for being rather lazy," Vivi pointed out.

"Are you really defending them?!" Usopp asked shocked. "You have more of a reason to hold a grudge than any of us! They targeted you for assassination! Does traveling with them not bother you at all?!"

The princess bit her lower lip and stared at the snow below her feet. "I...it's complicated."



"See!"

"But Damian has risked himself to help guard Luffy and Steven as they climb the mountain," Nami argued. "That has to say something."

Usopp waved it off. "Please, have you seen the way he looks at Petrea? There's something going on between them."

"I don't think so," Nami frowned. "I can pick up on these things. If it is, it's one-sided. Look, you know me, I'm not the most trusting person in the world, but I have this feeling that they are really trying. I mean, technically Vivi tried to kill us too."

The princess' face reddened and looked offended. "Hey! I already apologized for that! I was doing it for my people!"

"And they were doing it for their dreams," Nami reasoned. "Tit for tat. Still, it is about time that our little painter actually does something!"

She marched right over to the young girl and put her hands on her hips. "Oy! Genevieve! Are you done taking a break? We could use your help already!"

"I need to finish this," she simply responded.

"Finish what?! The house will still be here, the snow isn't going anywhere...what could possibly..." Nami started to yell before she stared at the canvas she was working on.

It was a painting of one of the snowmen placed in front of Dalton's house. It was the one that had the afro on its head and the sunglasses. Nami remembered that it was Steven's snowman and became confused. "What...?"

"The avalanche killed the snowpeople guarding the house," she explained while continuing to paint.

"Yes, yes, we all mourned the death of Snowzilla!" Usopp sauntered over. "Why is painting a snowman more important than helping out the townspeople?"

"Because..." she looked over and adopted the smallest of smiles. "It looked like Steven cared deeply about it. He'll be sad that it was gone. I wanted to preserve the memory for him."

Nami and Usopp exchanged a look. Vivi, who was observing from the distance, put her hand over her mouth in shock. 'Maybe Nami is right...maybe all they needed was something positive to rally behind...'

However, the moment of reflection was cut short by the arrival of new people. They wore jackets identical to the one that Genevieve was wearing and it was immediately apparent who they were: Wapol's royal guards.

"What?!" Dalton cried out in anger. "When did you get back?! Where is Wapol?!"

"Hush yourself, Dalton!" A brave soul stepped forward. "By the order of King Wapol, we have heard that the pirates who insulted him before have congregated on our island. His express command is to kill any and all painters, starting with the brat who hypnotized him!"

He pointed over to Genevieve. The girl looked to the left and then to the right. Finally she pointed to herself. "...me?"

"YES! DO YOU SEE ANY OTHER PAINTERS AROUND HERE?!" the man yelled. He then raised his rifle and pointed it at her canvas. "Die you traitorous brat!"

It happened suddenly, but the man instantly collapsed to the floor. In a flash, the other guards dropped like flies. The townsfolk and the pirates looked to see what happened.

"Ha ha!" Usopp cheered. "They never saw me coming!"

"What?! That was you?!" the townspeople gasped. "How did you do that so fast?"

"Quite simply I used my..."

"Oh. It's you," Genevieve interrupted. She pointed to a near naked man sheathing a sword next to the fallen bodies of Wapol's men.

"Mr. Bushido?!" Vivi's jaw dropped. "What happened to your clothes?!"

Usopp stared down at his feet dejectedly and in shame. "...I was going to stop them..."

"I went swimming and got caught up in the avalanche," Zoro shivered. "I came by hoping to get another coat."

"Didn't I get you a coat?" Genevieve asked, trying to look away at the sight.

"...I might have thrown it overboard as part of my training..." the swordsman explained.

"THEN YOU'RE AN IDIOT!" Usopp and Nami yelled at once.

Dalton looked at the fainted forms of the guards at his feet and stared off at the castle. "If Wapol isn't with them, then he must be heading towards the castle...I cannot allow our country to fall to ruin again."

"Then fear not, Dalton!" Usopp struck a manly pose. "I will climb the mountain with you!"

"What a laugh," Zoro chuckled as he put on a guard's jacket and pants. "You wouldn't even make it through the snow."

"HEY! DON'T MOCK ME! AT LEAST I'M SMART ENOUGH TO DRESS APPROPRIATELY!"

"We don't need to worry about that," Dalton started to walk away. "The avalanche revealed a pulley rope at Doctor Kureha's house near Gyasta. Anyone who wants to join me in reclaiming our country, come right ahead. We will save Drum Kingdom even if it means tearing everything down with it!"

\*AGITR\*

"You did what?!" Doctor Kureha cursed at her guests. Luffy, Sanji, and Damian had joined the doctor in Petrea's room while Steven had taken it upon himself to seek the reindeer out after learning his

name.

"You said you didn't want to be part of the crew. The reindeer is a doctor who likes pirates, so we asked him to come with us," Luffy shrugged. "Got a problem with that, granny?"

The old woman twitched her eyebrow and hit the pirate so hard that he hit the wall. "Impudent brat!"

"Did we do something wrong?" Petrea asked.

"On the contrary, take the kid. It will do him some good. He's hurting...hurting more than he lets on," she gave a weak chuckle. "What about it, Straw Hat? Can you cure his pain?"

"Shishishi!" Luffy laughed. "I'll do my best! Now I just have to convince him!"

"I don't get it," Sanji went to smoke a cigarette before the doctor shot him a look, which caused him to instantly put it away. "Why is the furball hurting?"

"All his life he's been isolated," she took a drink and wiped the remnants off her lips. "His fellow reindeer hated him, the townspeople called him a monster, and the one person who showed him friendship died. I think the blonde over here might have been the first person to call him a friend in five years."

"Well she won't be the last!" Luffy said determined. "I'm going to go find him and make him a part of my crew no matter what!"

As he left the room, the old doctor couldn't help but chuckle. "I don't doubt that you will punk. I don't doubt that you will. AS FOR YOU TWO!" she pointed to Damian and Sanji, who were trying to escape but were too noisy. "You aren't going anywhere! I still need to look your spine and ribs!"

"...I hate you ,eyebrows. So very, very much."

"Feeling's mutual, shithead."

\*AGITR\*

The young half-Gem was in awe of the interior of the castle. Despite being inside, every crevice was covered in snow. The boy was near-frozen but loved the sight ever so. However, he was on a mission and he was going to finish it. "Chopper? CHOPPER! You can come out now!" he called. "They aren't going to eat you!"

Steven then noticed that the door was open and deduced that it was the cause for the snow. "Brrrr! Maybe...maybe I should close this before we freeze to death!"

"NO! DON'T CLOSE IT!" a voice yelled. It was the cute little reindeer, running toward him as fast as he could. Before Steven's eyes, he changed shape from the small form that he knew to a taller, more muscular form.

"...that's amazing!" Steven jumped, moving away from the door. "Chopper, how can you do that?!"

The larger Chopper stood between him and the door. "...this form doesn't scare you?"

Steven shook his head and then he noticed why the door was open: there was a small nest at the top of it. If he had closed it, the baby birds would have died. "Ahh! I almost hurt the birds! I'm so sorry, Chopper!"

"Why won't you leave me alone?" Chopper turned away.

"Why do you want to be alone?" Steven countered.

"What?" the reindeer asked.

The boy's smile disappeared. "If you can tell me why you want to be alone and it is a good reason, I'll go away. But if you can't, then I want to be your friend!"

"Friend?" Chopper returned to his natural, cute state. "But...don't you hate me? I'm a monster! I have a blue nose! I talk! I..."

"So what? Those are all really cool things!" Steven got closer to the reindeer. "Who cares if you are different? Look at me! I'm a half-alien rock boy from a parallel dimension and I get along great with

the others!"

"Par...parallel dimension? Is THAT why you have..." Chopper pointed to his stomach, which Steven exposed for the little guy. The pink quartz gem shone in the light, making the nearby snow shine a pretty pink. Steven thought it was beautiful, but Chopper surprised him. He bent down to the snow and held it in his paw. Then he moved it away from the gem's reflection and looked sad at the regular white color of it.

Steven flung himself down on the ground and started to move his arms and legs back and forth. "Come on! Make a snow angel with me!"

"Wha...what?" Chopper looked at Steven confusingly. The boy got up and showed off his finished product.

"See? It's a little woman! You try!"

The reindeer fell backwards in the snow and started to emulate Steven. He got up and looked sad. "Mine has antlers," he said dejectedly.

"Hmmm," Steven stared intently at the two figures and snapped his fingers. "You're right! That's a problem." He went to his own and started to draw similar-looking antlers on his own angel. "There! Now we are twins!"

"Twins?"

"Twins!"

Steven started to laugh and surprising even himself, Chopper did as well. The two laughed for many minutes, enjoying making snow angels, until Chopper immediately got up. He sniffed the air and adopted a look of fear.

"It's him!"

"What?! Not him!" Steven thought about it and cocked his head. "Um...who is 'him?'"

"Wapol! The bastard who disrespected the doctor! I can't allow him to hurt Doctorine and the doctor's dream!" With that, Chopper turned into a full reindeer and bolted away from the boy at full speed. He practically ran over Luffy, who had finally found the two of them.

"Hey! Chopper! Come join my...woah!" Luffy dodged the reindeer and jumped into a snowbank. "Wait! Come back!"

"We have to follow him, Luffy!" Steven helped him up. "He said that Wapol is back!"

"Wapol!" Luffy started to crack his neck until he blinked. "Um...who's Wapol?"

"I don't know!" Steven told him. "But Chopper hates him!"

"Then I hate him too! Let's go!"

The two ran as fast as they could to catch up to their animal friend. After what seemed like an eternity to the battered and bruised half-Gem, he still found the strength to keep going. He had not had to endure this much continuous action in his entire life, but despite the pain he felt amazing on the inside. He was FINALLY being trusted to help with missions. He was FINALLY trusted to be an equal and not coddled like he could be with the Gems at times.

Luffy believed in Steven.

By the time they almost made it out of the castle and to the edge of the mountaintop, the two warriors learned exactly who Wapol was. "Oh hey, it's that hippo guy from before!" Steven recognized him from a distance.

"You mean the guy who almost had you shot," Luffy frowned. "Do you remember what we talked about, Steven?"

The boy nodded. He did not particularly like thinking about doing anything like that, but he was going to show his friend that he would fight with him until the end. Despite not knowing them very long, he felt just as protective of his new friends as he did the Gems.

"WHY IS THERE A PIRATE FLAG WHERE THE DRUM EMPIRE

FLAG SHOULD BE?!" the fat king bellowed.

"That old thing? I burned that when you fled like a coward," a familiar voice mocked him.

Steven and Luffy exchanged looks. "The old lady?" Luffy asked.

"They are gonna hurt the nice doctor!" Steven worried.

"Chess! Kuromarimo! That flag is an insult to my perfect kingdom! Kill the old broad and her protectors while I burn it!" Wapol ordered.

"Yes, Your Majesty!"

"NO!" Chopper's voice called out. "DON'T TOUCH DOCTOR'S FLAG!"

"Hold back!" Luffy ordered.

Steven stopped, confused. "Why?! They are gonna hurt Chopper!"

"Sanji and Damian won't let that happen. I want to hear what he is going to say!"

The boy nodded, understanding that he wanted to let Chopper defend himself. Then he picked up on the other thing he said. "Wait, Sanji and Damian?!"

"The hippo guy said 'protectors!'" Luffy yelled before he ran out of sight.

"That's good," Steven whispered before he turned his attention back to Chopper.

"Doctor wanted to heal this country! You and your men are a disease that needs to be cured! I REFUSE TO LET YOU TOUCH DOCTOR'S SYMBOL OF HOPE!"

'Doctor?' Steven asked himself.

Steven watched Chopper lunge at Wapol while the now visible forms of Damian and Sanji attacked Wapol's bodyguards. He was



conflicted yet again. He wanted to help them but he was told to stay back. However, when the hippo man opened up his mouth and literally shoved the reindeer inside of it, Steven knew he had to act.

His stomach began to glow and he willed his shield into existence again. He grabbed the weapon and threw it with all of his might like a Frisbee at the man. His aim was true and it hit Wapol in the stomach so hard that he spit Chopper out. The reindeer flew in the air and Steven formed a bubble around him to soften the blow of landing in the snow.

"THE KING!" the man with the afro yelled. He started to run toward Steven, who created another shield to defend himself. Before he could do anything, his would be attacker fell to the ground in an explosion.

"Don't touch the kid," Damian said while picking his nose. "Damn, I'm good."

"HOW DID YOU DO THAT?!" Chopper asked both Steven and Damian. "THAT WAS AWESOME!"

"Devil Fruit."

"Gem."

Chopper's jaw dropped as he took it all in. "But...but..."

"Just think of us as a bunch of monsters," Sanji joined in, kicking the other guard into the wall.

"...monsters..." the reindeer whispered.

"Sanji!" Steven clapped.

"The one and only. And this monster did that without Devil Fruits or weird rocks in my stomach! That was all me!" Sanji adjusted his jacket and grinned.

"WOW!" Chopper commented with awe.

"You do realize you three just swatted away the king and his most

powerful aides like they were flies, right?" the old doctor asked.

Sanji looked to the ground and shrugged. "They were annoying."

"Did anyone ever tell you guys how odd you are?" Kureha laughed. "I like your guts, you brats!"

"A king?" Steven asked. "That guy wasn't even a pirate but a king? Aren't kings supposed to be good people?"

Damian nodded and suddenly looked a bit worried. "Damn, I didn't even think of that. I hope this doesn't blow up in our faces."

"Hahaha! You said 'blow up!'" Steven laughed.

"STOP ENCOURAGING HIM!" Sanji twitched his eyebrow.

"ALRIGHT GUYS, I'M HERE!" the voice of Luffy rang out. He ran out from the castle, fully clothed this time, and looked to the ground where Wapol and his men were trying to get up. "WHAT?! I MISSED IT!"

"Where did you come from?" Sanji asked.

"I needed my coat! It was cold!" Luffy argued.

The cook shook his head in disappointment. "You should have been prepared, you idiot!"

Steven went over and patted his sullen captain. "It's okay, Luffy. You'll get them next time."

"Who...who do you think you are?!" Wapol coughed, rising off of the ground. "You dare...you dare strike the king?!"

"Oh goodie!" Luffy clapped his hands together. "He's awake!"

"DON'T MOCK ME, BRAT!" He spat at Luffy. "I will show you the true power of my Munch Munch Fruit: the Munch Munch Factory!"

"...his Devil Fruit is called 'Munch Munch?'" Steven laughed. "That's a silly name!"

"SHUT UP! Chess, stand up and tell them what I've eaten today!" Wapol demanded.

"Yes...yes, sir!" the comical-looking man got up. "You ate a baked cannon, a fresh cannon, and cannon balls salad with a gun powder dressing! Oh, you also ate a deserted house we came across after we got you under that painter's spell."

The Straw Hats just looked at each other, not knowing exactly how to comprehend such a concept. "...that doesn't sound very appetizing!" Steven reacted with disgust.

"It's weird is what it is," Sanji concluded.

"Agreed," Damian and Luffy nodded.

"FOOLS! YOU DON'T GET IT!" Wapol forced himself to laugh. " My Devil Fruit allows me to absorb and assimilate anything I eat! All of those things...ARE NOW PART OF ME! **MUNCH MUNCH SHOCK!**"

The king's body began to twist into several grotesque shapes. Steven and Chopper forced themselves to look away in horror while the others watched Wapol assume his new form. Finally, the two gazed eyes upon the new Wapol. His hands were now cannons and his body now resembled a house. The top of his hippo coat looked to be a cross between a cannon and a smokestack.

"THIS IS MY WAPOL HOUSE!"

# The Would-Be King

The Straw Hats took in the oddity that was King Wapol. Here was a man that literally turned himself into a house. Steven could not believe the absurdity of the situation. THIS was a common occurrence in this world?

Then again, Onion existed in his world, so it was roughly on the same level of weirdness.

"That was so cool!" Luffy admitted.

"You are too easily impressed!" Sanji admonished him.

Wapol, however, merely laughed. "Impressed? You haven't seen ANYTHING yet. It is time for you to see what I can really do!"

The hippo house then did something that made Steven's blood boil: he ate his two companions. Slowly and slowly he chewed them without care. Looking to his companions, it appeared that they were just as mortified as he was.

"This...this is just wrong!" Luffy yelled. "Stop eating your men!"

"Eating? Mahahahahaha!" Wapol started to laugh. "Please! I am creating the ultimate warrior of Drum Kingdom! This is FUSION! **MUNCH MUNCH FACTORY!**"

"Fusion?!" Luffy and Steven spoke at the same time.

Steam rose out of the smoke stack on Wapol's head and the door on Wapol's stomach opened up revealing a brand new warrior. He had both of the heads of Chess and Kuromarimo and wore a similarly revealing outfit.

"BEHOLD: CHESSMARIMO!" Wapol announced, clearly proud of his warrior.

"That's not fusion," Steven crossed his arms. "Fusion is something deeper than just eating two people and spitting them out!"

"Aren't they just standing on each other's shoulders?" Sanji asked.

"STOP MOCKING MY ULTIMATE WARRIOR!" Wapol screamed like a whining child. "What do you know about my powers?!"

The half-Gem looked serious as he stepped forward. "Fusion is the most personal thing two people can do! It takes serious trust, commitment, and purpose to share a bond like that! You can't just force fusion!"

"I can do what I want! I am the king!"

"King of fools!" Steven stuck his tongue out at him.

The comment only made the king angrier. With that, he pointed his cannon arm at the pirate flag flying on top of the castle. "You mock me?! WHEN THAT FLAG BURNS, THEN YOU WILL KNOW ME AS THE TRUE KING!"

The cannonball shot out faster than lightning. It headed up in the sky toward its target. Steven summoned his shield immediately and threw it toward the flying object. Unfortunately, he missed it by mere inches and the flag started to fall.

Watching the Jolly Roger collapse onto the roof, Chopper started to twitch. He looked like he wanted to scream out and cry, but instead he turned into his giant reindeer man form. He lunged toward Wapol but merely grabbed him. "WHY DID YOU DO THAT?!" he yelled at him. "DOCTOR WANTED TO HELP YOU AND YOUR PEOPLE!"

"Chopper?! What are you doing?!" Kureha yelled to him.

"You dare touch ME, monster?!" Wapol growled. Then he did the stupidest thing he could possibly do: he shot the reindeer.

"CHOPPER!" Steven and Luffy both yelled at once. It was then that they knew what needed to be done. Incised with anger, the two joined arms and started to run around in a circle. Both of them kept the same serious expression and they were soon enveloped in the same glowing light as before. Damian, Sanji, and Kureha stared in awe at the sight of the two beings becoming one. Wapol and his men, however, looked bored and disinterested at the sight.

"What is this?! Some kind of weird dance?" Wapol started to laugh. Then he realized exactly what was happening and his eyes widened. "Wait...what?"

The light faded and revealed the combined form of Luffy and Steven once more. Using his Devil Fruit and Gem powers, he jumped to the top of the castle and held the fallen flag up back where it stood.

The fallen form of Chopper forced himself to get up from the snow and look at the new combatant. "...it's him: the fusion!"

"...holy shit," Sanji ran his hands through his hair. "They actually did it."

"Where do you come off shooting this flag?!" Lufven yelled down from the top of the castle. "Do you even understand what it means?!"

"What are you even talking about?!" Wapol asked. "It's just the stupid symbol of a dead idiot! Why do you even care?!"

The fury in Lufven's eyes intensified. "First you insult fusion and now you insult the legacy of a dead man?! What kind of a person are you?!" Lufven pointed to himself as tears filled his eyes. These were not tears of sadness but of pure passion. "YOU WILL NEVER UNDERSTAND THE TRUE MEANING OF THIS FLAG BECAUSE YOU HAVE NEVER BEEN A PIRATE!"

Angered by the way he was being spoken to, Wapol fired his cannon once more directly at the fusion. Still holding onto the flag with one hand, Lufven closed his eyes and allowed his stomach to glow. The light went down into his left foot and kicked it forward. **"GUM GUM QUARTZ KICKBALL!"**

The cannonball connected with Lufven's foot but was immediately encased in one of Steven's famous bubbles. The now glowing pink cannonball was sent back at the would-be king. Panicking, Wapol pushed his ultimate warrior in front of the oncoming projectile weapon.

"PROTECT YOUR KING!" he cried.

With a giant bang, the fake fusion was struck. It hit the giant white hippo that they had apparently used to climb up the mountain and flew off the side of it into the distance. The single "being" separated back into two as they flew away. Sanji, whose eyes were locked on the incredible sight of his captain merging with the new kid, was too engrossed in the moment to note that his theory about the "fusion" was correct.

\*AGITR\*

Inside of the trolley up the side of the mountain, Usopp started to squirm around. "Hey! Move your arm, Zoro! It's jamming my ribs!"

"That's not my arm, you idiot!"

"Then move whatever that is!" Usopp swatted a sword away. "How much longer until we reach the top?"

Dalton looked out and gauged the distance between their current position and the top of the mountain. "Not long. A few minutes perhaps. We would have been there if we didn't pack this trolley to the brim!"

It was true. All of the Straw Hats (save Carue, who was apparently back on the ship alone), Dalton, several citizens, and a bunch of doctors formally under Wapol's employ that rejoined the people after Wapol returned to his former self had all managed to squeeze into a single compartment. There was little room to move at all, but they tried to make the best of the situation.

After a moment, a gunshot was heard and the people descended into a frenzy. "Wapol has gotten into the armory! We are doomed!"

"If he ate all of the weapons there, he would be unstoppable!"

"...ate?" Usopp and Genevieve asked at the same time.

Unfortunately for them, so many people were talking at once that it was impossible to hear anything.

Nami, who had the benefit of being squished right up to a window, tried desperately to get some idea of what was going on. "Hey, I think someone is yelling up there!" She tried to get everyone's

attention, but the mob mentality was strong. Finally, she had enough. "HEY! KNOCK IT OFF!"

The people immediately stopped talking and regarded her with fear, including her companions. It was clear that Nami was not a person to be trifled with. "Now that I have your attention, listen closely! People are yelling up there!"

The silence in the car was something to behold. Nobody, not even Dalton, wanted to make Nami angrier than she already was. But amazingly, this allowed them to hear Lufven's passionate comments about faith.

"Who is that?" Zoro asked. "One of that Wapol guy's men?"

Dalton shook his head. "It doesn't sound like Chess or Kuromarimo..."

"Look!" Nami pointed as best as she could. "What is that? A cannonball?"

The villagers screamed in excitement. "It's Wapol's men!" Dalton tried to explain. "But...but how...who...?"

Zoro smirked. "Guess they made it up without a problem after all."

\*AGITR\*

The Luffy-Steven hybrid shot a terrible look down at Wapol. It was clear he felt nothing but disgust at this man. Wapol, for his part, started to back away. He looked for his hippo in a panic, and it was then that he comprehended just how alone he really was.

"A true fusion wouldn't come apart so easily! A true king would not have sacrificed his people! He would have faith in them!" Lufven cried. "FUSION IS A SIGN OF UNITY AND THIS FLAG IS A SIGN OF FAITH, NEITHER OF WHICH YOU KNOW!"

The fusion jammed the flag back into place and formed a pink bubble around it, keeping it in place. Lufven jumped down from the top of the castle and marched toward the man. He looked scared beyond belief.



"WHAT ARE YOU?!" he freaked out. "PLEASE! TAKE THE KEY TO MY WEAPONS! RULE ALONGSIDE ME! JUST LET ME GO!" Wapol begged. He threw a key to the fusion, who swatted it aside and hit Damian in the face.

"I AM AN EXPERIENCE!" Lufven roared. He stretched his arms all the way back and threw them forward with all of his might. **"GUM GUM QUARTZ CANNON!"**

As with his underlings, Wapol was sent flying out into the sky. Screaming all the way, he somehow managed to fly completely out of sight. It seemed like he was sent off of the island completely. Lufven had done it, but he took little pride in his victory.

He went to Chopper, who had reverted back to his original form, and offered him his hand. "Are you okay, Chopper? I was worried about you."

"You...you defended the flag..." Chopper was too amazed to answer the question. "You took out Wapol! Wha...what do I call you?!" Chopper asked in pained voice.

The serious-looking fusion suddenly adopted a grin that looked like a combination of Luffy's and Steven's signature smiles. "Just call me Lufven...nakama!"

"Nakama?" Chopper repeated.

"It means friend...or crew mate!" Lufven then spied the bullet hole on Chopper's body and his smile faltered a bit. "Hmmm...I wonder..."

He spit on his hand and rubbed it on the wound. The reindeer jumped back, turned into his human mode, and hit the fusion in the head. "What was that for?! Why did you spit on me?!"

"Checking something," Lufven smiled. "How's your wound?"

"My...wound?" Chopper patted the bullet hole and was surprised to see that it had healed. "HOW DID THAT HAPPEN?!"

"It worked! Shiihashihasiha! My spit worked!" Lufven jumped high up in the air like an excited child. "This is great! I did it! I did it!"

"You!" Doctor Kureha and the others ran up to him. "Are my eyes deceiving me or did your spit just heal my reindeer?"

The fusion continued to laugh and dance around. "Nope! I have healing spit! Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't! But it worked! It worked!" As he was jumping up and down, he noticed the trolley docking at the edge of the cliff. While there were several people that neither Luffy nor Steven knew, he was able to pick out his crew mates very easily. "Hey! Usopp! Zoro! Nami! Vivi! Genevieve! Um..." he stopped jumping as he tried to remember Dalton's name. "That guy!"

The Straw Hats stared in shock at the being who stood before them. "Wait...who are you?" Usopp asked. "You kind of look like Luffy, but you sound different..."

"Wait...his stomach!" Vivi pointed and screamed. "It's Steven's gem!"

"WHAAAA?!" the Straw Hats, save Sanji and Damian yelled.

Nami's eyes widened. "Does this mean...are you...?"

"Call me Lufven!" he smiled.

Just then, Kureha went and hit him in the back of the head. "HEY! I WAS TALKING TO YOU!" The punch was strong enough to knock the fusion to the ground. The second he hit the floor, the being separated back into both Steven and Luffy. Both of them rubbed their heads at the same time.

"Ouch! What was that for?!" they both yelled in unison.

"GAH!" Usopp screamed. "How is that possible?!"

Vivi shook her head in disbelief. "Were...were...did you two fuse...like that Lapis Gem you told us about?!"

The two nodded in unison. "Stop doing that!" Zoro yelled. "You are freaking me out!"

"Interesting," the old doctor looked over the two black-haired youths. "I saw you unfuse before, but it was quite a sight to see you both

come together like that. Tell me, how did you do it?"

"The bad guy shot Chopper," Steven said immediately.

"He pissed me off," Luffy said at the same time.

They looked to each other and started to laugh again. "We were awesome!"

"That didn't answer the question!" Kureha yelled.

"I think it was because we both were feeling intense protectiveness over Chopper," Steven scratched his head. "We both were on the same funky wave length!"

"What does that even mean?" Nami asked.

"I don't know, but I agree with him!" Luffy laughed. The he stopped and noticed Genevieve. She had not moved or blinked, but had her mouth open in shock. "Yo! Genevieve? What are you doing? You look funny."

"That...that was one of the most beautiful things I have ever seen," Genevieve said in an unnaturally awed tone. "I'm engraving that moment into my mind so I can paint it later."

"Oh man," Steven added. "You should have seen that Wapol guy. He turned into a giant house with arm cannons and ate his friends. That would have made a great painting!"

"...I instantly regret not joining you."

"Also, who is this 'Chopper' you keep talking about?" Usopp asked.

Luffy pointed to the reindeer who was trying to hide. "Him. He's our new nakama!"

"Oh, is that all?" the liar nodded. Then he opened his eyes wide. "LUFFY, IT'S A MONSTER!"

The captain knocked him on the back of the head. "Don't call our doctor a monster!"

"...doctor?!" Nami said in shock. "You're a doctor?"

The reindeer nodded and started to back away from the large group of unfamiliar people. Nami, however, moved right to him.

"You are so adorable!"

Chopper immediately started to blush and tried to play it off. "Stop it, you bastard! What do you know about being adorable?"

"Say," Vivi scanned the mountain top. "Where's Petrea? Is she okay?"

"Oh, the girl?" Kureha laughed. "I have her inside tied down for a rest! Might as well check on her."

Meanwhile, Zoro looked Sanji and Damian over. He tried to fight back laughter at their heavily bandaged chests. "The hell happened to you two?"

"Killer rabbits. Very dangerous," Damian folded his arms and tried to look cool.

"I see. Shame the fusion of the kid and the captain couldn't try healing you before he became two again," Zoro smirked.

The two injured men have each other looks and then looked to Steven and Luffy. "...well shit."

\*AGITR\*

"GET ME OFF OF THIS BED!" Petrea bellowed at the top of her lungs.

When Chopper rushed into the room to tell Kureha about Wapol's return, Petrea requested to join and help defend the castle. The doctor told her no and told her to stay in bed like a "good girl." When Petrea made a fuss about it, Kureha immediately tied her back to the bed with the sea stone ropes.

"Warned you about the ropes, didn't I?" Doctorine had laughed.

"Damn witch!" Petrea grumbled. "It sounded intense out there! I missed everything!"

She tried to look from her bed out the window but it was no use. All she had to go on was the yelling and the cannon fire. It was more than the blonde was used to or expecting but it caused her mind to race.

Just what had happened out there?

"That voice...who was that?" she asked herself. Again she struggled to move out of the bed, but the ropes just made her weak. "WHAT IS GOING ON OUT THERE?! I DEMAND TO BE RELEASED!"

"You aren't in a position to be demanding anything, hun," the familiar voice of Doctor Kureha laughed. She walked through the door and gave off an air of confidence.

Petrea frowned. "Oh joy. It's you."

"Jealous of my good looks?" she winked. The woman moved to her and felt her head. "Hmm, better. It seems like you are practically back to normal. Since all the fuss is done out there, I might as well untie you...if you ask me nicely."

The former Miss Valentine twitched her eyebrow and sighed. "Please untie me..."

"What was that? I'm a little deaf in this ear."

"YOU HEARD WHAT I SAID! LET ME GO!" she yelled.

The doctor smirked. "Feisty, aren't you? You know, I don't think the kid is the only one who needs etiquette lessons."

Petrea merely hung her head, seemingly defeated. "That's it? You're giving up already? God, I was hoping for more of a reaction!" Kureha shook her head in disappointment. "Fine, I'll untie you."

The old woman did so and the second the ropes were off of her, Petrea jumped high in the air and stretched her muscles out. "God, I needed that! Ahhhhh!"

"Mind coming down from the ceiling before you damage it again?"

The blonde floated back down again and stood up, continuing to stretch herself. "So, are you going to tell me what happened out there or what?"

"Presumptuous brat!" Kureha went to hit her, but Petrea jumped away. "Hmmm...reflexes are pretty good. Nice to see."

The doctor started to make the bed and took a moment to look out the window. "The two kids fused again."

"What?! I missed that?!" Petrea pouted. She ran her hands through her hair and frowned. "Damn it! How..."

"About as interesting as you'd expect."

Petrea merely continued to pout. "That interesting?"

"You know it," Kureha laughed. "Anyway, regardless of me untying you, I still need you to stay in bed for a few more days just to recuperate."

"Unacceptable!" the chocolatier folded her arms. "We can't stay on this island any longer than we need to!"

"Listen girly, you need..." Kureha started before Petrea stamped her foot into the ground so hard she cracked it.

"No! You listen to me! I refuse to be the reason that we stay here! Every day that we stay is another day Vivi's people get slaughtered because of my actions! We NEED to get to Alabasta! I NEED to get to Alabasta! I owe it to that girl!"

"I already said I'm not interested in any backstory," Kureha told her, keeping her cool.

"I don't give a damn what you are interested in!" Petrea howled in anger. She picked the woman up by her collar. "I appreciate you helping me, really I do, but this is it! I refuse to be held prisoner here any longer! I was an Officer Agent in Baroque Works and I will NOT be lectured by an old woman who has no sense of morals!"

Kureha allowed the woman to pant for a moment, curious to see where this would play out. As expected, Petrea blinked and stared at her hands and put the woman down in shock. "I'm...I'm sorry! I'm unaccustomed to being spoken to like that and... I've really been trying to put the..."

"Not. Interested."

"But..." Petrea started to insist before the old woman put her finger to her lips.

"Look, you are lucky that I waved my fee when that idiot with the jeri curls gave me Wapol's key or else it would have been a hell of a lot larger thanks to the crap you just pulled," She adjusted herself.

"Now you will stay in that bed if you know what's good for you! I'm going to go over some things with Dalton. Disregard the open door and the jacket by your bed. If you even think of touching them, I will make your life hell. Understand you brat?"

Kureha shook her head. "Kids these days. No respect." With that, she left the room, leaving Petrea all to herself.

"I...wait, what?" she said, trying to take in everything she said. Then she forced herself to smile. "...stupid old witch."

Putting on the jacket and making her way outside to find her companions, Petrea reflected on her behavior from a few moments ago. 'I can't believe I did that. I thought I was past this kind of...no. I can't start the pity party again. I'll learn from this, try to control my anger, and never act that way again. I'll show everyone that I'm more than just Miss Valentine. I'll...'

She stopped her thought when she came across the giant open door. Looking up, she noticed the small bird nest that was hidden away. Smiling, she adjusted her weight and jumped up to it. "Hello, little guys. I don't think a door is the best place for you to be. Hmmm..." She scanned the room and found a secure rafter near a window. She jumped up again, bringing the nest with her. She placed it there gently and nodded. "Much better."

\*AGITR\*

All good things must come to an end and with Petrea healed enough to sneak out on Kureha's watch, the Straw Hat crew returned to the Going Merry with a new member of the crew in hand: Tony Tony Chopper. To send the reindeer off, Kureha had managed to use a formula designed by the late Dr. Hiriluk to turn the snow a light shade of pink: the color of cherry blossoms and, coincidentally, Steven's shield and gem. Steven learned the significance of it by Chopper, who was in tears at the beautiful sight. After hearing his story, Steven was crying just as hard too.

As when they departed Little Garden, the Straw Hats threw another party. This time the guests of honor were both Petrea, for her return to health (despite not wanting to be thrust into the spotlight), and Chopper, for joining the crew. Zoro busted out some expensive liquor and passed it out to everyone save Steven, who declined to taste it. A good time was had by all.

Petrea, still insisting that the party was for Chopper and Chopper alone, brought out a tray full of chocolate treats she whipped up in an hour much to the reindeer's delight. The only person who didn't seem to care for them was Zoro, who Petrea learned hated chocolate. As she passed out pieces of cake, Vivi pulled her aside.

"You know, I heard what you did to the old doctor back there," she admitted. "Did you really grab her by the collar and threaten her?"

The blonde's smile instantly disappeared as she started to fumble for an explanation. "I...well...look, I'm not happy about what I did. I'm working on it."

The princess put her hand on her shoulder. "I know. I heard exactly WHY you threatened her too."

"Princess, I did a lot of terrible and unforgivable things to you and your people. I have no reason nor do I ever expect your forgiveness. But I want you to know I will do what I have to do to atone for what I did as Miss Valentine," Petrea poured her heart out. It was clear that this was a sore topic for her, but also one she was feeling passionate about.

"Well you have one thing right: you did do a lot of terrible things,"



Vivi frowned. The chocolate maker hung her head in shame. "But you were wrong about it being unforgivable. You really DO want to make it up to my people, don't you?"

The woman nodded, her eyes still glued to the floor in shame.

"I forgive you," the teenage princess smiled. "Besides, it's hard to stay mad at someone who can make such great chocolate."

Petrea started at the princess in shock. "...are you...are you serious?" she whispered. After Vivi nodded, Petrea embraced her and started to cry. "Thank you! Thank you!"

"Ack!" Vivi started to choke. "Too tight! Too tight!"

The night continued with increased celebration and joy. The pirates, princess, and guests even started to dance, though it soon became clear that it was an attempt for Steven to try to fuse with several of them. Though he was hesitant when he first realized it, he started to enjoy the night when it became less about fusion and more about having a good time.

"Steven!" Genevieve caught up with him after the boy finished dancing with a clearly drunk Usopp for the fifth time that night. "Got a minute?"

"Is it about Lufven again?" Steven sighed. "I know, I know. You want to paint him. I don't think fusion is happening tonight."

"No, it's not that," she shook her head. "I'll do that later. But I have something for you."

"For me?!" Steven asked in shock. "Is it an instrument?!"

"...no. Actually, apparently Straw Hat did ask Dalton before we left if anyone had any instruments for sale, but I'm guessing that didn't pan out."

"Oh well! We will make it work!" the boy smiled. "So...what's up?"

She pointed over to the corner next to her where her canvas was resting. "Can you get that? It's too far away."

The boy blinked. "But...but you are right there!"

Her eyes darted from Steven to the canvas multiple times until Steven just grabbed it. He took a look at it and his eyes widened. "...Garnet..."

"Your snowman died in the avalanche. You seemed attached to it," Genevieve explained. "I...are you okay?"

The boy was staring intently at the image. Tears filled his eyes and he began to sob. Steven began to hug the painting and started to gently cradle it as he rocked back and forth.

"What did I do?" Genevieve started to panic. "What DO I do?!"

"Garnet! Garnet!" he kept repeating. The painter had expected an emotional response, but not to this extent. She looked at the party where everyone was having a great time in a drunken revelry. "Um...hey. Guys? A little help?"

The only person near enough to notice the action was Nami, who rushed over. "What happened?! Why is Steven crying?"

"I gave him the painting and he just lost it!" Genevieve said, surprisingly worried. "He just keeps repeating the word 'Garnet' over and over again."

"'Garnet?' Isn't that one of those Crystal Gems from his world?" Nami thought about it. Then it clicked. "Ah. I get it."

The navigator put her arm around the crying boy and patted his back. "You okay, buddy? It's not right for a pirate to be sad at a party."

Steven sniffed and tried to wipe away his tears. "This...this just...I miss them!"

"We know you do, Steven," Nami tried to console him. "We will help you get home. I promise you. Hopefully your rock will work in Alabasta."

"But what if it doesn't?" Steven asked, looking back at the Garnet

made of snow that Genevieve captured for him. "What if it never works? What if I'm stuck here? What if I never see the Gems again? Or Connie or Dad or Peedee or Lars or Lion or Sadie...?"

"Then we will keep trying until it works," Nami said assertively. "We aren't the kind of people to give up lightly."

"Do...?" Genevieve piped up. "I mean...this is one of the Crystal Gems, right?"

Steven nodded, his eyes never leaving his gift. The young painter, with considerable effort, walked away and grabbed her painting supplies and brought them back. She sat down and picked up her brush. "What do the others look like?"

"What?" Steven asked.

"You said there were three Gems. What was it?

*Garnet...something...and something...and Steven?"* Genevieve tried to remember exactly what the lyrics were, despite it being a few days since Steven sang the song when explaining everything to the Straw Hats. She bit her lip and gave up on it. "What do the other ones look like? I...I don't think we can get you back to them by ourselves, but I can give you something to help you think of them until you do."

The boy took in her words and Nami started to smile. The boy started to cry again but stopped himself after a moment. "Well..." Steven started to talk before blowing his nose on his sleeve. "Pearl is kind of...kind of tall with orange-blond hair and a big nose like this!" he emulated the rather large pointed nose of the Gem in question. He was starting to get excited again. "Her gem is in her forehead right here!"

The painter started to draw. "Like this?" she pointed to the nose she started to draw.

"No, that's too big!"

The navigator got up and left the two younger members of the crew to their work. She spied Damian going drink for drink with Sanji and

Zoro, Chopper dancing with Usopp and Luffy, and Vivi and Petrea laughing over chocolate. 'Guess I was right after all,' she thought to herself. 'They really are trying.'

# The Gems' Quest

A bright light shone through the darkness of a wrecked craft. The floor of the shuttle was lost on the hard impact with the surface. The holes that lined the walls revealed the terrain to be acrid and barren. Though it seemed devoid of life, the perimeter was littered with movement.

What seemed like hundreds of mechanical beings stood at the ready, armed to the teeth with various projectile weapons. A quick glimpse outside would show that this shuttle was but one part of a larger craft, shattered and spread out throughout the dusty surface. It seemed like the robots had not only converged on the other portions of the ship but were prepared to lay waste to this section as well.

It was in this hellish situation that the Gems, Lion, Greg, and Connie found themselves.

"This is certainly different than the other worlds we visited," Pearl noted. She summoned her spear into existence as a precautionary measure. "Let's not stay here any longer than we need to."

"I don't know, guys," Amethyst looked around. "It's kind of cozy."

Lion sniffed the air and walked around a bit. The group looked at each other with hope in their eyes. "Jeez, if this is where Steven is, I'll be kind of worried," Greg shivered. "This looks like something out of Alien...why couldn't we be back in that neighborhood with the kids or with that blond-haired muscular dude?"

"Focus, Greg!" Garnet commanded. "We need to keep our priorities in mind!"

Pearl looked over to Lion and saw that he was motioning away from them. "Lion, what is it? Is it Steven?"

He shook his head and nudged his paw around the corner. Garnet moved forward slowly and peered around. It appeared to be a group of five or so people of various shapes, sizes, and colors. They were

all huddled around some of the holes in the decaying structure.

"They look like some of the creatures that attacked that samurai! Don't tell me that we have gone in a complete circle back to that terrible place!" Pearl whispered angrily.

Lion pointed again at the people. "What? What is it about those people?"

Unfortunately, Pearl got her answer in the worst possible way. A dark, booming voice echoed the corridor and caused the warriors to fill with dread. "Jedi. You are surrounded. Your army is decimated. Make peace with The Force now. For this is your final hour. But know that I, General Greivous, am not completely without mercy. I will grant you a warrior's death. Prepare!"

The Gems all looked confused at this ominous warning. However, Connie and Greg both opened their eyes in shock.

"General Greivous?" Connie asked.

"The Force?" Pearl thought about it. "Where have I heard that before?"

"We need to go!" Greg cried. He started to break out into a sweat. "NOW!"

"Woah! Greg, what got into your system?" Amethyst laughed. "Is Greggy a big 'fraidy cat?"

It was then that a familiar hum erupted from the people. Each of the strange-looking creatures and humanoids pulled out what appeared to be laser swords that emitted either green or blue blades of light.

"You don't understand!" Greg started looking around frantically. "I know where we are! I know what this is! This is the Clone Wars!"

"...the what?" Pearl asked as she tried to make out what the weird-looking people were saying.

"It's from Star Wars!" Connie clapped her hands. "Oh my gosh, Star Wars is a parallel dimension! That is amazing!" She started to try to

get a good look at the Jedi Knights mere feet from her.

"No...I mean, yes," Greg admitted, before readopting his fearful expression. "But think about it! This is the Clone Wars! We are in a war zone! What will I tell your mother if something were to happen Connie? 'Oh, sorry Priyanka. Connie got hurt in a lightsaber duel with Mace Windu!' She would kill me, bring me back to life on the operating table, and then kill me again!"

"Calm down, Greg," Garnet told him. "I'll open the next rift."

"Besides," Connie continued to geek out. "It's General Greivous. The guy is a push over!"

"AHHHHHHH!" one of the Jedi screamed as he ran outside, clearly too impatient to let General Greivous come to them.

"No! Padawan!" another Jedi called after him. However, it was too late. A giant, metallic being in a cape jumped down and killed the noble warrior. The fallen Jedi's lightsaber flew through into the wreckage near the group. The caped cyborg then jumped into the rafters and hid with the shadows.

Connie's jaw dropped. "Oh my stars. General Greivous was actually...effective?!"

"GARNET! WE NEED TO LEAVE NOW!" Greg shook her. As she was shaken, the Belly Bag Badge fell to the ground. Greg immediately dove for it before finding himself staring right at the metallic shine of General Greivous' foot.

"You are not Jedi," he snarled. "But you will die just the same!"

"GEMS! PROTECT GREG!" Garnet yelled. Her fists changed into gauntlets and she jumped forward, punching the robotic general in the chest. Unfortunately, it did little to move him. He grabbed a lightsaber and ignited it. He swung down at the Gem before Amethyst used her whip to pull back the robotic hand. Using her staff, Pearl went in to strike. She jumped up and went to slice down before she was caught midair by Greivous' other foot.

Eying both the miniature fanny pack and the dead man's lightsaber,

Greg dared to grab both and ignited the weapon. "Ahhh!" he slashed the weapon at Greivous' remaining foot. The general was prepared for this though and threw all three Gems at him, knocking them all backwards.

"Play possum!" Greg whispered in a groan. "The Jedi will cover us!"

As expected, the remaining Jedi, who seemed amazed that there were civilians caught up in their fight, used the opportunity to attack Greivous while he was distracted. Unfortunately, it seemed as if the droid commander was prepared for anything and effortlessly switched his attention from the Gems to the Jedi.

Connie opened up her backpack and went to grab her sword. "Connie, what are you doing?!" Pearl asked in horror after they found a moment to slink away back to Connie and Lion's position.

"They need our help! They are going to be killed!"

"This isn't our war Connie!" Greg tried to reason with her. "This is the Clone Wars! Anyone who isn't named 'Obi-Wan Kenobi' or 'Yoda' is going to die! We need to get out of here before we are added to that body count!"

"But..." Connie pleaded before Garnet activated the Belly Bag Badge, taking the choice out of her hands.

\*AGITR\*

The group landed in a dark cave with a giant thud. Greg stared at the lightsaber in his hands in awe. "Oh my gosh! I held onto it! I OWN a lightsaber! Steven is going to be so jealous!"

"Greg," Garnet stood up and offered him her hand. "Thank you. You might have saved our lives back there."

"What?!" he started to laugh nervously. "No I didn't! I just..."

"You really did, Greg, though I'm amazed to admit it," Pearl forced a smile. "Connie, are you okay?"

The girl looked a bit upset but nodded her head. Then she shook it.



"I just hated leaving those Jedi to die! It is one thing if it was just a movie...but I SAW them! I KNOW what will happen to them."

"Connie, all things die," Pearl put her arm on her shoulder. She stared back at her and bit her lip. "Even us. For all we know, our few extra seconds bought one of them a chance of escape."

The girl just looked at the backpack she was carrying and frowned. "I...I've never been put into this kind of situation before."

"And I'm sorry you had to as well," Pearl told her. "It is easy to forget how little you and Steven have experienced. Combat is...well there is never a good reason for fighting. But sometimes it is necessary to protect the ones you love."

"If we had stayed and fought, we could have died. If we had died, you would have died," Garnet told her plainly. "If you died, Steven would have nobody to play with when he got home."

Connie started to laugh. "Well...I guess it was all necessary to get to the glory that is Lando Calrissian."

Greg joined her in the chuckle. "Say, where's Amethyst? She's been awfully quiet."

"She's been with me," a deep voice called out to them from the shadows.

"GENERAL GREVIOUS!" Greg whipped out his lightsaber. "Stay back! I have a laser sword and I know how to use it!"

"Relax, Greg!" Amethyst laughed, coming out of the aforementioned shadows. "This guy found me and just wanted to know why and how we were in his cave."

The man in question stepped into the light. He was wearing a blue and black costume with a yellow oval on his chest. A flowing blue cape hanged off of his shoulders and was attached to a cowl of the same color.

"BATMAN?!" Greg fell backwards. "HOLY SMOKES! YOU'RE BATMAN!"

The Caped Crusader blinked in shock for a moment and nodded. "I know."

"Wait...back up...so both Star Wars AND Batman exist in separate dimensions in our universe..." Connie was spouting excitedly. "The implications of this are astounding! I wonder if we are going to see Under the Knife or Dog Copter or..."

"Separate dimensions?" Batman asked. "Hmm...makes sense. Judging by your reaction, you aren't from a parallel Earth in my version of reality. Rather, I seem to exist as a form of entertainment in your world. Based on the conversation I overheard, it is clear that you are dimension hopping looking for a friend of yours. Still, to test the theory...tell me: what's my name?"

"Batman!" Greg and Connie said at the same time.

"My REAL name."

"Bruce Wayne!" Greg beat Connie to it. "That means we are under Stately Wayne Manor!"

Pearl raised an eyebrow and gave the man the once over. "How... how could you have possibly come to that conclusion so fast?"

"I'm Batman. I make it my business to know. "

"Pearl, it's Batman." Garnet shook her head. "Even I know who Batman is."

"Don't you pay attention to anything Steven likes?" Amethyst playfully taunted.

Pearl opened her mouth to protest, but decided against it. "Alright then...'Batman'...you are right. Greg's son Steven used an ancient alien weapon to accidentally send himself flying through a rift in reality and now we are trying to track him down."

"I understand," Batman motioned them to follow him. "You all look exhausted. I'll have Alfred make you lunch. I have a few tools that I might be able to use to help see if your Steven is on this Earth."

"You don't have to do that," Pearl pointed out. "Lion..."

"Um..." Connie spoke up. "We've been traveling nonstop for what feels like days. I really could use a bite to eat."

Lion roared in agreement. He was presently lying next to a dog in a replica of Batman's mask. "A bat-dog?" Pearl whispered to herself. "I don't understand superheroes..."

"How can you hate Ace the Bat-Hound?" Greg laughed, walking over to pet the Canine Crusader. "He's the odd pup out in the Bat Family, but he's still just as much of a part of them as any of the Robins or Batgirls!"

"Robins? Batgirls?" Batman thought about it. "Interesting..."

After a bit of typing and a few sandwiches made by an English butler, Batman had managed to pull up a surveillance feed directly from something called "The Watchtower."

"Unfortunately, I can't find a trace of transdimensional rifts on the planet that aren't related to either the known dimensions reached by a Phase Oscillator or through a Boom Tube outside of the Batcave. I'm sorry to say but I think you are out of luck."

"You tried, dude!" Amethyst said, shoving down another sandwich. "I guess it is back to that badge thing for us."

"Agreed," Pearl nodded. "We've rested enough. Thank you again, Mr. Batman person, but we really should be off."

"Wait," Greg asked. "What about Superman? Maybe he can use his Phantom Zone stuff to get a better lock on Steven...or something!"

The beak-nosed Gem shook her head in frustration. "Greg, now is not the time to put off finding your son so you can play with some outrageous superhero and live out repressed childhood dreams!"

"'Outrageous,' you say?" a disembodied voice called out. "In this dimension, that's more of an Aquaman thing than a Superman thing."

Pearl immediately summoned her staff. "What was that?!"

"Oh no," Batman groaned. "You don't want to know."

With a giant poof, a small floating young man appeared. Dressed in a similar outfit to Batman but decidedly more juvenile, he started to fly around the group. "Hmm, dimensional travelers, eh?"

"This is new..." Garnet commented, more confused than concerned.

"What do you want Bat-Mite?" Batman folded his arms sternly. "I thought you were going to stay in the 5th Dimension."

"5th Dimension...jimony jillikers! You're Batman's Mr. Mxyzptlk!" the elder Universe pointed out. "Wait...that means you can bend the laws of reality!"

"Good thinking, Greg," Batman nodded. The man looked at the superhero in shock and awe at the mention of a compliment. "Bat-Mite, I assume that if you're here then you can possibly help these people."

The floating imp laughed. "Of course I can, Batman! After all, I don't want you sharing any more screen time with these interlopers!"

"Hey!" Connie pouted. "Who are you calling interlopers?"

"Ah, the feistiness of youth!" Bat-Mite twirled in a circle. "Anyway, while you got here based on the properties of a character whose existence is based purely around the limitations of his place in reality, I have a bit more of a broader approach!"

He snapped his fingers and produced the map of the Multiverse that was given to the Gems by Mr. Gus. "You are all limited to travel purely in this layer of reality because that is all that your 'Uncle Grandpa' can access. I, however, can take you to anywhere and everywhere a Batman has appeared!"

"And what does that mean exactly?" Pearl asked. "How is this relevant at all?"

"Your precious 'Steven' isn't in this layer of reality. I checked for you

with the studio executives," Bat-Mite rolled his eyes. "I have that power here in this chunk of reality."

"I am so lost," Greg admitted.

"Not the only one, dude," Amethyst concurred. "This whole experience has been way too out there for me."

"However, while I am limited in the next layer of your reality, I can bring you to the best possible person to assist you there. Several versions of Batman have existed there."

Batman narrowed his eyes. "A generous proposal, but what's the catch Bat-Mite? You only ever do anything to get closer to me. How does this benefit you?"

"Oh, no reason..." the 5th dimensional being smiled. "I just want you to let me help you on another amazing adventure. I happen to have gotten some information that Bizarro may have created a Batzarro and I want to help out with the ensuing fight!"

"...is that all?"

"I also want your Bat-Radia...for sentimental reasons!" Bat-Mite flashed a toothy grin and batted his eye lashes. "What do you say, Batman? Please? Pretty please?"

The superhero nodded. "Fine, you can help me defeat that deranged duplicate's doppelgänger. Do any of you have any objections?"

"I'll do anything if it means getting my son back," Greg affirmed.

"You heard the man," Garnet cracked her knuckles. "Let's get going!"

"Thank you for your hospitality, Batman!" Connie smiled.

"Um...before we go..."

The Dark Knight flashed her two pieces of paper. "Figured you might want it. One for you and one for your friend."

"An autograph! Thank you! Thank you!"

Before he could open his mouth, Greg was handed one as well. "Good luck finding your son, Gregory. I admire and respect your dedication as a parent."

As Greg startled to babble uncontrollably, Bat-Mite snapped his fingers and left Batman all to himself. He looked over to his dog, who seemed sad that Lion had left. "It's okay, old chum. It was for the best. Come on, maybe we can call Clark and let you have fun with Krypto or Streaky."

\*AGITR\*

Greg blinked for a second and realized they all had already been transported out of the Batcave. He gazed around to get a better grip of his surroundings.

Similar to the Clone Wars ship, it appeared as if they were in some kind of space craft. Unlike that shuttle, this one appeared to be in working order. Greg spied Connie run over to a window and gaze out into what the older gentleman was shocked to see as space.

"Oh my gosh! We are on a spaceship!" Connie said excitedly. "You'd think the excitement would wear off by now, but this is still so amazing!"

The Gems made their way to the window to get a better view of the area. "I don't see any nearby planets. We must be in deep space...by our dimension's logic," Pearl rubbed her chin. "So 'Bat-Mite,' where is this person you were talking about?"

"Person?" Bat-Mite laughed. "You're on your own! I'm getting back to Gotham!"

"But you said..." Connie protested.

"That I'd get you here, and I did! Now it's up to you to find him! Good luck, interlopers!" With a snap, he vanished once more, leaving the Gems, humans, and lion stranded.

"So...what now?" Amethyst asked.

"I knew I didn't like that little Bat-thing!" Pearl stamped her foot. "Oh that just makes me furious!"

Garnet put her hand on Pearl's shoulder. "There's no need to get worked up Pearl. We know that Steven might be in this third of reality. That is better than finishing the other layer and realizing how much time we have wasted."

"You mean if that creature was telling the truth to begin with!"

It was at that point a monitor came down from the ceiling. Once again the Gems readied themselves for anything. However, the screen turned on and revealed a being that was clearly female but more robotic in nature. "This is Sara from the Absolution. Free ship. Registration key 031797. Please identify yourselves!"

"Watch out! It's a female Max Headroom!" Greg cowered.

"Oh," the British sounding female A.I. spoke. "It's Carl. Here to see TOM, I suppose?"

"...Carl?" Pearl asked in confusion. "Who's Carl?"

"Carl's here?" a male voice called out from down the corridor. "And he brought friends! Where's Meatwad, Master Shake, and Frylock, buddy?"

"Who?" Greg asked dumbfounded.

"You know, the talking food?" the voice responded.

"I think he's talking about that Crying Breakfast show Steven watches," Amethyst whispered to the group.

They all followed the voice to a medium sized grey and black robot. It had a spherical head and what appeared to be sunglasses for optics. As he drew closer he stopped and cocked his head.

"Hold on...you're not Carl. Sara, what is this?" the robot asked.

"I don't know TOM. He gave off an outer-dimensional reading similar to Carl," the female voice responded. "Plus, you have to admit he

looks like him."

"TOM?" Connie asked. "As in the one who knows Uncle Grandpa?"

The male robot pointed at Connie and then the Gems. "Wait...I know about you guys. You're those Crystal Skulls...no wait, that's not right."

"Crystal Gems!" Pearl explained, though clearly annoyed. "The Bat-Mite thing teleported us here saying you can help us pinpoint our Steven, who might be lost in this layer of reality!"

"Bat-Mite?" "Uncle Grandpa?" TOM folded his arms. "Hmm...follow me to the bridge. Explain everything to me again and we will sort this out. Let's roll, Toonami Faithful!"

"This is getting weird," Garnet commented offhandedly.

"Getting?" Greg and Amethyst said at the same time.

Pearl and Connie did their best to explain the situation to TOM, who seemed to be comprehending everything more than they were expecting. On the bridge of the Absolution, TOM sat down in his command chair and started pressing several buttons.

"Well if Steven is stuck in one of the shows that I oversee, I think that we can narrow it down a bit more than purely dimensional hopping," TOM tried to explain.

"Shows?" Don't you mean parallel dimensions?" Connie picked up on it.

"Yeah, that's what I call them. Go figure," TOM shrugged. "So Garnet, tell me exactly what you saw with your Future Vision in the exact order you saw it."

All eyes fell on Garnet, who took off her sunglasses rubbed her three eyes. "I saw Steven leaving a tropical island and being on either a snowy mountain or a desert. I believe the mountain was the first thing I saw."

Typing fast, TOM started to read off a list of potential places to



check. "Hmm...Neo Earth, Moon Kingdom, Negaverse, Cybertron, Jurai, Namek...okay here's one. Muscle Tower."

He pulled up an image of a snow covered mountain with a large tower on it. A giant red and white symbol appeared on the center of it. A young boy with a stick seemed to be running toward it.

"Well, Garnet?" Pearl asked. "Is this it?"

The Gem shook her head. "No. It's not right. Darn it."

TOM kept plugging away. "Don't lose hope now. I'm sure we will find something. Ah! Here we go! You said a tropical island followed by a snowy mountain. I present to you the Grand Line!"

He flashed an image of a snow covered island that seemed to be a shade of pink. Lion's body stiffened and growled. Garnet's eyes widened and pointed. "That's it! Steven is there!"

"How can you be sure?" Greg asked.

"That is the dimension! It's the pink hue! One of the outcomes I saw had Steven stand on a pinkish snow, but I thought it was just Steven's shield. I didn't think it was important, but that's it!" Garnet recreated her sunglasses. "TOM, I know it is deep down inside."

"Then what are we waiting for? Let's go get Steven back!" Connie cheered.

Each of the members of the group gave a triumphant and serious nod. TOM punched in a few more buttons and motioned to a door. "Go down there and enter the third doorway on the right. That will get you to at least Little Garden. You're on your own from there though. For what it's worth, I hope you guys find him."

"Take care, Crystal Gems!" Sara called to them.

Reaching the door, Garnet went to pull it open. She turned her head to her companions and kept her cool. "Let's do this."

"Yeah! Steven, we're gonna get ya!" Amethyst yelled. It was clear that all of the others shared the Gem's positive and energetic

attitude. Garnet herself flashed a smile before opening the door and jumping through.

"STEVEN! WE ARE HERE!"

The Gem looked around and noticed she was in the air and plummeting towards a large patch of trees on a small, yet beautiful, island. "Oh bugger."

One by one they landed in the island, though Garnet made sure to catch Greg and Connie before they hurt themselves. Almost immediately, Lion began to point towards the center of the jungle terrain.

"Is it Steven, Lion?" Pearl asked with great hope. "Has he been here?!"

He nodded and roared a loud and mighty roar. The group started to cheer before spotting a most interesting sight. It had appeared that they landed not that far from an odd-looking boat.

"A 'three?' Maybe it's the third ship in a battle fleet!" Amethyst offered, unfamiliar with human naval vessels. "It looks weird."

"Hmm...I'm sure the 'BW' stands for something as well," Pearl went over to examine it. "It appears that we aren't alone on this island. Perhaps we can hitch a ride to the mainland."

The leader nodded and regarded Connie and Greg. "We need a ship to get off and find Steven. I don't know if Lion here can teleport us to him."

"Can you, Lion?" Connie knelt down to the pink beast. He shook his head.

"Besides, you two wouldn't be able to hold your breath that long. I have no idea how far it is to get to that desert I saw..." Garnet started to pace. However, she stopped when she heard a man's voice coughing and laughing at the same time.

"Desert,' you say? It sounds like you...you need help," the voice spoke. He revealed himself from the thick forest of trees and vines,

showing himself to be a man covered in bandages, a broken pair of glasses, and his hair made up in a distinct "three."

Adopting defensive stances but withholding summoning their weapons, the Gems eyed the man. Finally, Garnet stepped forward. "We do, stranger. We are looking for a friend of ours."

"Hmm..." the man looked to Lion and backed up in fear. "A pink lion...random people...no ship...you wouldn't happen to be looking for the Universe boy, would you?"

The group was in shock. This man KNEW who Steven was! "State your name and tell us how you know Steven!" Garnet moved closer to him, walking past a misty-eyed Connie and Greg.

"I assure you, the boy...ow!" the man clutched his sides in pain. "The boy is unharmed. As for my name...call me Mr. 3."

"Very well. Tell us everything you know about his whereabouts, 'Mr. 3.' It is very urgent that we find him!" Garnet pried offensively. There was something off about this man, but he was their only hope of getting Steven back to Beach City.

"Sailing to the Kingdom of Alabasta," Mr. 3 adjusted his glasses. "He is traveling with...ugh...with a group of pirates who raided my ship of all its valuables and food. I was hoping to catch them myself."

He seemed to check out each of the Gems before adopting a calm, but calculated smile. "It seems we are both after the same thing, my dimensionally inclined friends. Care for a ride...partners?"

# The Training

"Pour, o pour the pirate sherry! Fill, o fill the pirate glass!" Steven was singing bright and early. "And to make us more than merry, let the pirate bumper pass!"

The previous night's revelry left most of the crew incapacitated from a hangover. As such, when Steven awoke in a happy mood thanks to his new paintings, he had nobody to talk to beside himself.

"Argh! Hoist the sails, Frederic, lest ye be walking the plank on the eve of the night you would be free of your indentures!" Steven pointed his hand at nobody.

"Aye-aye, Pirate King!" Steven responded back to himself in a slightly different voice. "Where we be sailing to today?"

Steven let out a hearty laugh. "Ye barnacle brain! Ye know we be heading to the lagoon! That's where General Stanley is! I 'aught ta..."

"What the hell are you doing?" a male voice called from the top of the Going Merry.

Steven looked up and saw the sweaty form of Zoro staring at him confused. He began to wave. "Hey Zoro! I'm just playing *Pirates of Penzance*! You want to play?"

"...no."

"Oh! How about we play *Peter Pan* instead? You could be Captain Hook and I could be Peter Pan and we could have a duel with swords! It would be so cool!" Steven begged.

"...no."

"Aww," Steven kicked the floor dejectedly. "Say, why aren't you sleeping? What are you up to?"

Zoro held up one of his swords. "I'm training."

"TRAINING?!" Steven's irises turned to stars. "Can I join too?!"

"Steven, I'm training to cut steel. I don't think you can keep up with what I'm doing," he frowned. He turned to go back to his training. However, in an instant the boy had managed to run up and gave Zoro puppy-dog eyes.

"Please Zoro! I know you are so awesome at sword fighting but I need to make my shield useful for you guys! That throwing trick you showed me before we docked at Drum worked out great, but it won't be enough! Please teach me more!"

The swordsman twitched his eyebrows but then smiled. "Well...I am pretty awesome. Fine...but if you are training with me, I want you to give it your all."

"Aye-aye!" Steven saluted.

Zoro sighed and rubbed his jaw. "Okay, so I haven't really seen you do any actual fighting. Why don't you punch me? Let's see what you've got."

Steven spit on his hands and rubbed them together. "Alright! But I have to warn you, I'm stronger than I let on."

"Then show me," Zoro hit his stomach. "Punch me right here. Put all of your energy into it."

The young boy swirled his arm into a circle and threw the hardest punch he could. He closed his eyes and yelled. "Gah!" Peeking from his closed eyes, he whispered. "Did I hurt you?"

It turned out Zoro didn't even move...at all. He looked down and shook his head. "Was that it?"

Steven nodded while blushing. "I mean...sometimes when I'm mad I can get a bit stronger, but I don't think it's by much."

"...this is going to be harder than I expected," Zoro ran his hands through his hair. "Okay, physical combat isn't your thing. That's fine. Summon your shield."

"That I can do!" Steven smiled, willing it into existence. "What now?"

"Now? Now I'm going to attack you to see just how much your shield can take!" Zoro said, picking up only one of his three swords.

"Wait, what? Ah!" Steven raised his shield up to block Zoro's strike. Again and again, the swordsman lunged at him. Steven found it incredibly hard to keep it up and to hold his concentration.

Zoro increased the fury of his attack. Steven was forced more and more backwards until he found himself trapped by the railing. With a single swipe, Zoro went to break his shield, but Steven used all of his energy to push him forward, catching him off-balance slightly. Unfortunately, it drained the last of Steven's willpower and his shield disappeared back into his gem.

"Hmm...you actually caught me off-guard for a moment. Not bad kid," Zoro admitted. "But it's still...what are you doing?"

The half-Gem was grinning ear to ear and bouncing on his toes. "You complimented me!"

"Oh brother!" Zoro smacked his face in disgust. "Knock it off and make your bubble thing. I'm testing that too."

The smile instantly disappeared and Steven frowned. "But...but I don't think my mind and gem can take too much more so soon after that!"

"Will an enemy give you the chance to rest?!" Zoro hit him with the hilt of his sword. "If you are training with me, you will follow my every instruction! Now make the bubble!"

The boy jumped back in fear but nevertheless did what he was told. Zoro proceeded to hit Steven's bubble with all three of his swords, getting faster and more intense with each strike. Inside the bubble, Steven cowered while looking at the swords coming inches away from his face.

"Stop looking away!" Zoro yelled at him. "You are giving your enemy everything he needs with your body language!"

"I'm trying! I'm...wait, how are you talking with a sword in your mouth?!" Steven asked, cocking his head in the bubble.

Zoro was not amused. "If you aren't going to take this seriously, then I'll show you just what to expect in combat. **Tiger Trap!**" He put the two swords he was holding over the blade in his mouth and slashed them at Steven, popping the bubble and sending him flying off of the ship into the ocean.

"Gah! Help! Gem overboard!" the boy was yelling while gargling water.

Zoro's eyes widened when he realized exactly what he did. "Aw shit. That's not good."

\*AGITR\*

"What the hell were you thinking, Zoro?!" Nami yelled at him a short while later.

The commotion of Steven crashing into the water woke practically everybody but Luffy up from their alcohol induced comas. With some teamwork from Nami and Sanji, who was clearly doing it to impress Nami and Petrea, Steven was brought back onto the Going Merry and wrapped in a towel. He was presently getting looked over by Chopper.

"I told the kid I was going to go all-out on him. I wasn't trying to knock him overboard..." Zoro sighed. It was clear this was the exact reason he didn't want to let Steven train with him: overprotective crew mates.

"Mr. Bushido, you should have shown better judgment!" Vivi joined in. "He could have died! What if there was a sea king or another carnivorous animal by us?!"

"Yeah, moss-brain," Sanji added, clearly not caring about anything but the women. "Don't you see the stress you are putting us through?!"

"We don't need your help Sanji!" Nami and Vivi yelled at the same time. The cook instantly backed up and got out of the line of fire.

The green-haired man just gritted his teeth, prepared to zone out, and nodded his head. Yes, he had gone a bit tougher on Steven than he had anticipated, but Zoro had tried to dissuade the kid from joining him. He barely tolerated Damian spotting him, but at least he was a reminder of what he needed to overcome.

But then the damndest thing happened.

Steven hopped off his chair and started to stretch his arms and legs. The small reindeer seemed to be panicking, but the boy just walked over to the swordsman and gave a weak smile.

"Chopper thinks I should rest a bit or else I might get sick, but Jasper or Crocodile wouldn't wait for me to get better. So, what should we do now?"

The swordsman was speechless. This kid was full of surprises, wasn't he? He might be young and inexperienced, but his will and dedication were to be admired. Maybe there was hope after all.

"Steven," Vivi tried to interject. "You aren't thinking clearly! You almost just got hurt!"

"I'll get hurt in battle won't I? The Gems get hurt all the time but they still fight," Steven stood his ground. "If I can get stronger I can save your country!"

As Vivi covered her mouth in shock, Zoro couldn't help but smile. "Come on, kid; let's get to it. If we can master your bubble, you could actually be a Gem to be reckoned with."

"REALLY?!" Steven asked in awe. His face started to blush but then he smacked it, forcing himself to adopt a serious expression. "I mean...let's do it!"

As Zoro walked by Nami and Vivi, he made sure to flash both of them a smile. 'Just to rub it in their faces,' he thought.

\*AGITR\*

For the next two days, Steven and Zoro continued to train whenever they could. Luffy forbade anyone from witnessing them for fear of



ruining the surprise. Since fusing with Steven, Luffy was getting more and more curious about the boy and his heritage. If he wanted to get stronger, he would do what he could to help.

After fusing with him, Luffy knew the best way to help him was to keep the watchful eyes focused elsewhere.

Thankfully, this worked out for the best. Usopp had taken the time to create and finalize a personal weapon for Nami known as the Clima Tact. Resting, he decided to go fishing off of the Going Merry with Carue. On the other side of the ship, Vivi and the former members of Baroque Works pooled their resources together with the other Straw Hats to figure out the best possible plan of attack against their former boss. This was useful for Chopper, who had no idea what Baroque Works even was.

It was during this meeting that Zoro and Steven took a break to see what the commotion was about. They found them gathered around a table with a plethora of information written down on paper, including the remaining known Baroque Works agents, the members of the rebel army, and the key people in the royal army.

"Since we know for a fact Crocodile is Mr. 0, do we know where he frequents in Alabasta?" Damian was asking as the two walked over. The bomb man turned to acknowledge the two with a nod. "Kid. Zoro."

"Typically he roams around on his own...but I know that he owns the Rain Dinners casino in Rainbase," Vivi was pacing around. "But we can't just march right to Crocodile's front door!"

"Why not?" Luffy asked. "I'm gonna kick his ass anyway. Why not get it over with?"

The princess shook her head. "If we can do this without getting more civilians involved with the rebellion, then I would be happy. We can't let more people get hurt by Crocodile's manipulations!"

"Vivi, if we stop Crocodile before the fighting begins, then the rebellion could be quelled before it became a problem!" Petrea tried to explain. "If we have a shot at Crocodile early on, I think it'd be

best to take it!"

"No," Sanji thought about it. "No, Vivi-chan is right. If we were to attack Crocodile early on before he made his move, the rebels might think that the king was using him as a scapegoat...damn it, that shitty asshole has made it impossible for us to do anything without the war actually starting!"

"Exactly! That's why we need to convince the rebels that Crocodile is the enemy! We can stop the fighting and keep the people out of this!" Vivi seemed relieved that somebody was getting it.

However, Damian shook his head "Princess, you need to understand that the rebels are going to fight either way. The best option would be to get them on our side. That way they can join with your father's men and we can take Crocodile on together."

"But..." Vivi said dumbfounded. This was clearly not the reaction she was expecting. Steven could see that and went to pat her back. She stiffened a bit, apparently defensive, but calmed down after a second.

"It'll be okay, Vivi. We will be there to help the rebels! I've been getting stronger to do just that!" the boy smiled.

While obviously still hurt, the blue-haired teenage forced a smile. "Really now? And how strong have you gotten, Steven?"

"Very! Zoro and I thought of some sweet moves! We'll give Baroque Works the works for sure!"

"That pun was terrible," Genevieve frowned.

"What would you know about the art of puns?" Steven pouted. Then he blinked and started to laugh. "Get it? 'Art of puns?' Hahahaha!"

The young painted continued to frown, but slowly the edge of her mouth twitched. Unfortunately, the half-Gem noticed it and continued to pester her about it for the next several minutes, much to the painter's annoyance.

The crew decided to ignore them and continued on with their war

council. "Now, the other alternative is to capture Crocodile alive and force him to admit to his crimes, but that is nigh impossible," Nami tapped her finger on the table. "The man is a Shishibukai for crying out loud! It'd be a suicide mission!"

"There is one thing that I can think of that would make this easier..." Luffy closed his eyes and thought about it. "Yes...one thing..."

The crew held their breath, waiting to hear what the captain would say. Would this be a stroke of strategic genius?

"We need meat! Sanji! We need food now!" Luffy pounded his hand on the table with great force.

The cook kicked Luffy right in his face and into the wall. "YOU SHITTY IDIOT! YOU CAN'T DO THAT IN THE MIDDLE OF A TENSE MOMENT!"

"Actually, some food would be much appreciated," Zoro held his stomach as it growled.

The blond merely laughed. "Please, we are in the middle of important planning. You all are so inconsiderate of the feelings of Vivi-chan."

"Um..." Vivi's face turned red. "I'm hungry too..."

"Ditto!" the others agreed. Sanji lit up a cigarette as his eye turned into a heart. He started running toward the kitchen as fast as he could.

"WHY DIDN'T YOU SAY, SO MY LOVE?! I'LL MAKE YOU THE GREATEST MEAL I CAN MUSTER!"

The chef entered the kitchen in a flash while the rest of them started to chuckle. In a tense conversation such as this, a little humor was appreciated. That was Steven's mentality as he tried to lighten the mood with more puns.

"I bet we will all get a kick out of the lunch Sanji will make us!" Steven tried, raising his eyebrows up. "Eh? Eh? 'Kick?' Get it?"

The only people who laughed were Luffy and Chopper. Usopp and Carue appeared to be laughing too, but their laughs were muffled a bit. Unfortunately, the laughter was cut short by Sanji storming out of the kitchen angrier than Steven had ever seen. "How is it possible that the food I carefully rationed to get us to Alabasta **DISAPPEARED OVERNIGHT?!**"

His eyes locked with Luffy, who shook his head. "Hey, I only took my usual portions! You know I raid the food at night!"

Sanji rubbed his jaw. "Well I do account for that..." he admitted. "But that doesn't excuse **ALL OF IT!**" He went over to Zoro and looked over his face. "You're too stupid to raid my fridge." Then he sauntered over to Steven. "You're too innocent." He moved to Chopper. "I don't think you even know where the fridge is." The last one at the table that he questioned was Damian. "...and where were you last night?"

"Passed out...in Petrea's room," he grinned.

"**WHAT?!**" Sanji went to choke him before Petrea knocked him out of the way so she could choke him herself.

"**STOP IMPLYING SOMETHING HAPPENED WHEN IT DIDN'T!**" she grabbed the bomb man and slammed him into the ground. "**YOU PASSED OUT ON MY DOOR IN A DRUNKEN STUPOR!**"

"Is that what happened?" Damian tried picking himself up. "I honestly blacked out."

"Wait, why are you only questioning the men?" Zoro asked irritated.

Sanji laughed. "No woman on this ship would be so heartless as to go behind my trusting and loving back! You should be ashamed for insinuating that it could have been any of them!"

The he paused and began to count the various people on the ship. "Shitty bomber...shitty moss-head...shitty captain...shitty emergency food...shitty kid...where's..." Sanji stopped and realized just who he was missing. "**THE SHITTY LONG-NOSED LIAR!**"

"So much bad language!" Steven covered his ears. Thankfully, by

doing so he missed all the colorful insults he yelled at Usopp and Carue, who were found to be eating a large quantity of food. When Steven uncovered his ears, he caught the tail end of Usopp saying how inventing makes a man hungry.

"Oh yeah?! Well be a man and provide for your family! Go catch us some dinner!" Sanji threatened. "And if any of you shitheads want to eat tonight, you should get down there and join him!"

Steven looked to the other men, who all stared down at their stomachs. Every single one of them shot Usopp a venomous look. The sniper shuddered in fear at the retribution that was no doubt coming his way. Finally, each of the men grabbed a fishing pole and found a spot on the Going Merry.

And that was how Steven began the most grueling part of his training: learning how to fish in the Grand Line.

# The Okama

Several hours later, the Straw Hat pirates were dying of hunger.

The lack of food was becoming a major issue for the pirates. They were still at least a day away from reaching the desert kingdom, but the fish were just not biting. Morale was low and nearly everyone looked mutinous. All of the supplies were drained from the previous two parties so they couldn't even pester Petrea for chocolate treats.

"Look!" Usopp pointed weakly. "What is that up ahead?"

Rising above the waves was a large, dominating plume of smoke. The colors were of as plentiful and beautiful as the smell was repugnant.

"Hmm...my guess is that it is an underwater volcano," Nami focused on it. "It's interesting to think that a whole brand new island will appear here in 10,000 years."

"Really?!" Chopper and Steven said at the same time. "That's amazing!"

"Let's play a game!" Steven cast out his rod once more. "Let's think of the best name for the new island!"

"The Meat Kingdom," Luffy drooled.

"The Land of Chocolate," Petrea licked her lips.

"Oatmeal," Usopp sighed.

The crew just stopped and stared. "...Oatmeal?" Nami groaned.

"It's a perfectly serviceable name!" the sniper argued. "It's just as good as a kingdom of meat!"

Genevieve, sensing that this prolonged arguing would be the best chance she could get, quietly sneaked back to her cabin to look for "bait." She quickly looked around and searched her art supplies

eagerly. "I know I have to have some leftovers here somewhere..."

With energy the young painter never knew she had, she rummaged through every bit of clothing she packed, which admittedly was not much but the girl was so used to staying relaxed that it felt like she was searching an entire clothing store.

Finally, she came upon her prize: a small box with a rice cracker logo on the front. The girl's eyes widened and an unnatural grin spread across her face. She closed her eyes and opened up the box, praying to see the entire thing full.

To her dismay there were only two left in there. Still, this was two more crackers than she had before.

"I have to make this last. Any fish that's caught will be devoured in an instant by Straw Hat and the swordsman. My only hope is kindness on the part of the cook because I'm a girl..." Genevieve sighed, realizing how low on the pecking order she really was.

She was once one of the highest members of a criminal organization. She could relax whenever she wanted and Mr. 3 typically let her do her own thing while he performed his "artistic crimes." It was all too much for Genevieve to do, but even she had to enjoy the benefits of doing such immoral things.

It was almost a shame that Steven broke that perception of reality. Almost.

"Hey Genevieve, you never came back with our bait!" the familiar voice of Steven called out. "I just know we can catch a big one in the volcano if we just..."

The boy walked into the room just as Genevieve put the snack to her mouth. She started to panic. She was clearly found out.

Steven put his hand over his mouth and pointed to the treat. "You...you...!" the half-Gem coughed and started to open his mouth a few times, as if he were trying to figure out exactly what to say. Finally, he just got on the floor and started to beg. "Can I please just smell the box? Please?!"

'Is he for real? He's really not going to ask for a bite or even ask if there was anything else? Is he a saint or something?' the girl thought as she stared at the boy begging before her. 'Either way...he's helpless.'

She reached into the box and threw it Steven. "Look, you can have the box if you want, but why don't you eat this instead?"

The boy's eyes eagerly scanned the rice cracker and motioned to accept it before shaking his head. "I can't take it. It's yours."

"Stop being stubborn and eat it," Genevieve picked up her brush. "I'll force you to if you don't!"

Tears started to flow out of Steven's eyes as he finally accepted the treat and he shoved it in his mouth in one giant bite. "Tsh ith shuuuuuuuu ghuuuuhd," he moaned with the food still in his cheeks.

"You never cease to amaze me," Genevieve fought back a small chuckle.

After swallowing the remnants of the food, Steven frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You might literally be the most naive, happiest person I know," she explained, finishing her own snack in the process. "I just do not get it."

"That's just because you're cynical! Give it time! I'll bring you over to the Steven Side eventually!" He looked around at the disheveled mess. "Do you want some help? I'm not as good as Pearl, but I don't mind."

The painter nodded and the two started to fold the thrown about clothes. Taking advantage of the quiet moment, she decided to ask him something she had been thinking about since the other night. "So, your friend Connie..."

"Mmmhmm?" Steven's ears picked up at the sound of her name.

"What are you two anyway?" Genevieve was naturally curious. "Are you two just friends or is there...I don't know...more?"



"More? I...I don't get the question," Steven's face turned bright red. "She's my best friend and I...what I mean is..."

"You like her," the girl stated. "You're allowed to like people you know."

"Ah! How did you know?!"

The girl blinked and shook her head. "You have it written all over your face. The question is, does she know?"

Steven started to fiddle with his fingers in embarrassment. "I mean...we are both really young...and I think we both like each other. We care about each other a lot...enough to fuse and for her to be my jam bud..."

The young painter put her hand on his and squeezed it. "I am the last person to ever talk to about this, but if you want my advice? Hold onto that. No matter what happens in Alabasta, hold onto those feelings. Never stop caring. You might be this crew's musician, but I think you're the Crystal Gems' heart."

Genevieve did not know where this sudden burst of emotion came from, but it was interesting nevertheless. She was fond of Steven, true, but she had connected with him on an emotional level the other night and it stuck with her. Prior to meeting him, the only thing she connected with was her paints and colors as a whole.

It felt nice to be connecting to actual people for once.

The sound of Steven sniffing snapped her back to reality as she realized that any mention of his friends and family was either a really bad idea or exactly what he needed to keep himself grounded. Genevieve didn't know the answer. This whole "emotion" thing was both too new and exhausting for her to think about.

"Steven, you've got to stop crying every time you think about your friends," Genevieve told him as she went to grab him a tissue. However it was too far away for her. The half-Gem, seeing the struggle, inched forward and grabbed it.

"But...but that was so..." he blew his nose. "So thoughtful!"

It was now Genevieve's turn to blush...well blush more than she did naturally. But before she could comment, she heard a giant commotion happening out on the deck. She forced herself to get up and offered a hand to Steven. "Think they caught a fish?"

"I hope so! I could use some real food...not calling rice crackers fake! I..."

"Stop with the apologies!"

The two left the room together and made their way to the deck to see what the fuss was about. Unfortunately, the sight was almost enough to cause Genevieve to throw up her precious cracker.

"Look! A ballerina with swans on him!" Steven laughed. "Come on! New person!"

Steven's description was accurate enough. There was indeed a ballerina on board the ship with swans on his back. However, Steven had neglected to mention that this ballerina was a crossdressing man. A man Genevieve knew too well, as did Petrea and Damian, who she spied trying to hide before he noticed them.

"Steven, you need to be careful," Genevieve warned in a hushed and serious tone.

"What?"

"That man...that man is Mr. 2," she gulped, still staying hidden. "We can't let him know Vivi is still alive."

The boy started to panic and hyperventilate. "Mr. 2! So he's Baroque Works and he's going to try to kill us and hurt Vivi's country and..."

Genevieve grabbed the Gem's shoulders tightly. "Listen to me! I think I can get us out of this, but you need to follow my lead. Do you trust me?"

He nodded. "Steven Universe is ready for anything."

She started to walk out but stopped. "I don't think we need Steven Universe for this. I think we need... *Tiger Millionaire*."

His eyes grew wide. "You remembered!"

"You created a cover story. I'm a painter. I like consistency," she shrugged. "Are you up to it?"

He closed his eyes for a moment and thought about it. "I need hair gel and for you to paint my face."

The girl just blinked, shrugged, and thought 'The hell with it. I believe in Steven.'

\*AGITR\*

Damian typically did everything he could to keep calm and act manly. Unfortunately, that meant grabbing Petrea and hiding out of sight the second Mr. 2 was pulled up on Usopp's fishing pole. There was a time and a place to keep up his, in his own personal opinion, badass attitude, but this was not one of them. He knew as well as anyone that Mr. 2, despite his ridiculous appearance, was not a force to be reckoned with.

He could see the same look in his former partner's eyes. This woman was formerly a hardened killer, but Damian knew that even without her change of outlook on life that she would be scared of the crossdressing ballerina. Outside of Mr. 1 and Crocodile himself, Mr. 2 was the strongest person in all of Baroque Works. However, that wasn't even what worried Damian. The problem was that he ate the Clone Clone fruit, which gave him the ability to copy other people's faces.

It also granted him a photogenic memory of every face he ever laid eyes on, including his own, Petrea's and Genevieve's.

Thankfully, the young girl was out of sight...somewhere. The kid went to look for her, but it had been a while since they left. If it were any other group of people, Damian would have gotten suspicious of what they were doing, but Steven was both too young and innocent to be doing something stupid. Genevieve...well Damian thought she was too lazy to do anything sneaky either, but she did technically rank higher than him in Baroque Works.

The only other person not in plain sight was that asshole cook, who had gone to the kitchen to look high and low for anything that he could cook. He was that desperate to feed...well feed the girls. Damian wasn't sure exactly how he felt about Sanji, but even if he did like him, he still thought he was an asshole.

"Thank you all for saving me! I never would have dreamed that people I have never met would go out of their way to save an okama like me!" Mr. 2 was saying while bowing to the Straw Hat crew. "You have my many, many thanks!"

"No problem, weird guy!" Luffy laughed. "Um...you have stuff coming off of your eyes..."

"Ahh!" Mr. 2 jumped up and tried to adjust his face a bit. "My mascara! It is ruined! Do any of you ladies have any that you can spare?"

"No!" Nami and Vivi told him at once.

The okama sighed theatrically. "Oh well, what can I say? I tried. I have to say, I thought I was going to die for sure out there. Thank goodness for the kindness of strangers!"

"Wait, you were drowning? Does that mean you ate a Devil Fruit?" Usopp asked with interest.

"Correct, my funny-looking friend! I happened to have eaten..." Mr. 2 started before he was cut off.

"Mr. 2 here ate the Clone Clone fruit," the voice of Genevieve called out. "He can change his body and face to that of anyone who he touches."

"What is she doing?!" Petrea whispered fearfully. "Is she trying to get us killed?!"

Damian bit his lip, trying not to show the woman just how afraid he actually was. "Let's see how this plays out."

"What?! Mr. 2?!" the Straw Hats yelled. Zoro pulled out his swords in defense and Vivi opened her mouth in horror. Luffy, ever one for a

fight, started to crack his knuckles.

"What's with all the sudden tension?!" Mr. 2 asked in shock. "And how do you know my name?! Who said that?!"

"I did," Genevieve walked out into plain view. She was followed by... 'what in the nine layers of hell is he doing?!' Damian asked himself in complete and utter disbelief.

Steven had slicked his hair back to a ridiculous level and had come across a tie that Damian was sure belonged to him. On his face was a black painted nose, orange cheeks, and what appeared to be whiskers. He looked to Petrea whose body language revealed that she was alternating between an anxiety attack and a laughing fit.

"Painter-chan?!" Mr. 2 jumped back. "What are you doing on a pirate ship?!"

"Gene..." Luffy started to ask before Steven got into his face and pushed him aside.

"You don't talk to Miss Goldenweek, Millions," he folded his arms and winked. "She talks to you."

"Millions? Oh! You commandeered a pirate ship? Does that mean Waxy is here too?!" Mr. 2 started to twirl around. Then he realized that there was a boy with paint on his face and he stared at him intently. "And who is this lovely creature?"

"That's Tiger Millionaire, a bounty hunter from the Outer Rim," Genevieve said flatly. "Mr. 3 and I met up with the 'Mr. 5 Pair,' attacked and killed the Straw Hat pirates for the boss and stole their ship. Unfortunately, Mr. 3 was killed by some giants he was trying to claim the bounty on. Tiger Millionaire here owed me a favor, so he helped me contact some Millions to help get us back to Alabasta for Operation: Utopia."

The Straw Hats looked utterly confused until Vivi, who seemed to have realized exactly what Genevieve was doing, got up and bowed to Mr. 2. "Oh, we are so sorry we didn't recognize you, Mr. 2! You know how secretive us Millions can be! I can easily go and get you

some of my personal mascara! Please forgive me!"

The crossdresser blew the princess a kiss. "For you, sexy? I'd forgive you in a second! I'd also like a cup of soup if you can spare it!"

Vivi bowed again as she backed up towards her room. "I'll go check the kitchen sir...er madame...but we have been out of food for nearly a day! Do you care, Miss Goldenweek, if I assist?"

"Mr. 2 is higher up than me," Genevieve told her. "Make him feel at home. If you see Mr. 5 or Miss Valentine, send them here on my orders."

Vivi nodded and motioned for the Straw Hats to follow her so she could explain what was going on. Damian was impressed at the audacity of what Genevieve was trying to do. From what she explained, Crocodile thought the Straw Hats were dead and the two pairs of Agents were on their way back to Alabasta. It was conceivable that they stole the Going Merry to make the trip more luxurious and for Millions to make contact with them along the way.

Honestly, he was amazed the girl even thought of it. It still didn't explain Steven's stupid getup, but now was not the time to think about that. Damian nudged Petrea and motioned to Mr. 2. "We need to make an appearance if we are to get out of this."

"What if this is a trap by Crocodile?!" Petrea asked worried.

"Then the Straw Hats will get involved and we will kick that okama's ass all the way back to Whiskey Peak," he adjusted his sunglasses. "Let's go and don't show any weakness."

As he strode out to greet his former comrade, the former Mr. 5 found himself to be a force to be reckoned with. He was bravery personified and nothing could stand him down. Petrea seemed to be nervous, but he knew that if he did all of the talking, he could get them through this.

"Oh! Sunglasses! Blondie! You're here too!" Mr. 2 clapped excitedly.

"Mr. 2!" Damian whispered in a weak, scared voice. "Don't hurt us!"

"Way to stay confident you idiot!" Petrea whispered out of the side of her mouth as she stepped on his foot.

"Hurt you?" he laughed. "QUIT JOOOOOOOKING AROUND!"

"You must be really tough to be Mr. 2," 'Tiger Millionaire' told him, in a false, tough guy voice. "I'm not easily impressed. Where's your partner?"

Genevieve whispered something to him, causing his eyes to widen and to drop his own act for a moment. "What?! You get to be your own partner! That's so cool!"

"I like you, Tiger Boy! Where are you off to in Alabasta?" Mr. 2 pried. "Off to find any hotties out there that you'd like to meet?"

"Nah," 'Tiger Millionaire' shook his head. "When I bring these clowns to their destination, I'll be off. I have to do the Kessel Run in less than twelve parsecs or my reputation is ruined! That blasted Purple Puma will not stop me this time!"

"Such conviction!" Mr. 2 was moved. "Such dedication to his craft! You are truly a force to be reckoned with! If there is anything I can do to assist you in your quest to defeat this 'Purple Puma' just speak the word!"

"Actually," Genevieve interjected. "Maybe you can help us. In the fight with the giants, we lost our Den Den Mushi to contact the boss. Where are we meeting again?"

Mr. 2 jumped in the air and struck a pose. "Oh you silly girl, I weep for your loss! Waxy was a brave, brave man to face the giants alone!"

"He was an idiot," Genevieve explained.

"Then good riddance to him!" he laughed. "The rest of the Officer Agents are meeting up at Spiders Cafe in three days' time at eight o'clock in the evening exactly. Even the 'Mr. 1 Pair' will show themselves! Be there or be squaaaaaaaaare!"

As he was dancing around, Damian noticed that the Straw Hats

returned. There was no doubt Vivi explained exactly what "Millions" were and why Genevieve called them that. It was clear that at least Zoro and Usopp were incredibly wary, but Luffy put on a happy face.

"Sorry, Mr. 2! We are all out of soup! Please don't take it out on us Billions!" he grinned.

"Millions!" Nami elbowed him.

"Millions!" Luffy corrected. "That's what we are! We are definitely Millions in Baroque Works!"

"Hmmm..." Mr. 2 frowned. "You claim to have taken this ship from the 'Straw Hat' pirates, but you are wearing a straw hat yourself. Why would that be, hmmmmmm?"

Usopp and Chopper gasped. Damian held his breath as well, fearing that the facade would be broken. However, Luffy merely smiled and put his hands on his hips. "It's very fashionable! Don't you think?"

Mr. 2's eyes lit up like a supernova. "I agree whole heartedly! You go, girl!" The two men did a jump high five while the others wiped the sweat from their brows.

"Such loyalty to the organization! I am touched! Truly I am! For your entertainment I will put on a show that is sure to get you all riled up for the days ahead!" Mr. 2 announced. With that, he started to change his face to a number of odd, quirky-looking people. However, Damian noted that one of them drained the color off of Vivi's face. He made a mental note to ask her about that once the okama left.

After the performance, Mr. 2 began to dance around with Luffy and 'Tiger Millionaire.' However, the revelry was ceased when a ship shaped like a swan appeared on the horizon. Mr. 2's expression brightened even more so than what it was. "What's this?! The Swanda! My ship!"

"We never would have guessed," the Straw Hats sarcastically said at the same time.

"But do not look sad, my lovelies! We will all meet again in Alabasta,



not merely as fellow Agents and Millions, but as true comrades and companions! Friendship..." Mr. 2 began to wipe the tears from his eyes as he gave them all a thumbs up. "WILL NEVER DIE!"

With that, he jumped back to his own ship, waving them off as they sped toward the desert kingdom of Alabasta. The second the ship was out of sight, Nami grabbed Genevieve by her shirt. "WHAT THE HELL WERE YOU THINKING?!"

"Saving your skins," she pointed out. "It was a long shot, but it worked out."

"She's right," Zoro grunted. "If Mr. 2 is as high up as he says he is, that means we won't be attacked by any other Baroque Works vessels that might be waiting in Alabasta. They will know to ignore our flag."

"Plus it keeps up with the story that we are dead," Usopp added. "This doesn't even begin to cover the fact that we now know where all of the Officer Agents are meeting up. This is an opportunity we cannot afford to pass up."

"If we can pass this information to the king, we might get the proof we need to stop Crocodile early on!" Steven chimed in.

The crew, save Vivi (who was still shell shocked), all stared at Steven and finally asked the question that was on their minds. "Okay, what the hell is with this makeup?" Zoro asked. "You look like an idiot!"

"Hey! This is my cunning and clever disguise! I'm Tiger Millionaire, former wrestler and current bounty hunter!" Steven protested.

"That's the name you used when you talked to Crocodile in Little Garden," Sanji, who had rejoined the crew right as Mr. 2 was leaving, pointed out. "Holy shit, you two actually created a cohesive and believable alibi! That's...that's impressive!"

"Well yeah! We ARE awesome! Right, Genevieve?" Steven went to give her a high five. She nodded and returned it.

"I can dig it."

"Word."

"It still doesn't explain the face paint," Petrea giggled. "Or your ridiculous hair!"

"Or MY tie!" Damian growled. "Add that to the list of clothes you still owe me!"

The only one who was in awe of Steven's makeup was Chopper.  
"STEVEN, YOU LOOK SO COOL!"

Steven blushed. "I know, right? I haven't dressed like this in months!"

"...you've dressed like this before?" Zoro asked. "Your dimension is just weird."

"I'm learning to just accept it at this point," Nami sighed. Then she noticed that Vivi was acting weird. "Vivi? What's wrong?"

"One of the faces..." Vivi started to panic and break out into a sweat.  
"One of the faces Mr. 2 changed into was...was my father's!"

"WHAT?!" the Straw Hats all yelled at once.

"That means Mr. 2 has, at one point, been in contact with my father...oh god, what if they've hurt him?!" the young princess started to cry. "With Crocodile being seen as a hero to the people and my father being vilified by the rebels, I don't know what to do!"

Stretching his legs and arms, Luffy pounded his fist to his hand. "I do. We kick Crocodile's ass!"

"First things first, we need a plan. We can't just go in and attack everyone at once!" Nami explained.

"Good point," the captain nodded. "Here's the plan: kick Crocodile's ass!"

"THAT'S NOT WHAT I MEANT AND YOU KNOW IT!" Nami hit him on the head. "We know where we need to be in three days. We just need to figure out how to get there, what to do when we get there,

and what to do if that fails."

The group fell silent as they began to put together all of the pieces of the Baroque Works puzzle. Nami wrote out all of the information they knew on a piece of paper and for several minutes they thought about it individually, save Luffy who just threw some punches around.

Finally, one person found their voice. "I have a plan!" Steven announced. "It is complicated, but I know it will work!"

The Straw Hats waited and let the Gem take the floor. "Alright, Steven," Nami said. "We are all ears. What have you got?"

# The Plan To End All Plans

"So, this plan has multiple steps but I know it can be done," Steven told the group.

Steven had requested the aid of Genevieve to provide visual accompaniment. She had set up several canvases on the off chance it required it. By this point, though Steven was accepted as a part of the crew, he was still perceived to be an inexperienced boy. Of course, having an imaginative mind might provide them with alternatives teenagers and adults might otherwise have dismissed as childish.

"Now, based on Vivi's map, we are landing here in a place called Nano...nano..."

"Nanohana," Vivi offered. "It is the easiest place for us to dock."

The boy nodded. "What she said. So the goal is to make it to that place Mr. 2 told us about: Spiders Cafe. That's alllllllll the way out here!"

Genevieve painted a fast replication of the map while he was talking. She created plots for all of the key areas of Alabasta, including Nanohana, Yuba, Rainbase, the palace, and, of course, Spiders Cafe. Whether they would actually be traveling to any of these places was beyond her. She was just as in the dark about this as anyone was.

"Now, why do you think it would be a good idea to meet out in a secluded cafe out in the middle of nowhere?" Steven asked the group.

"Murder?" Petrea asked.

"Staying out of the line of fire from a bomb?" Usopp guessed.

"Really good food?" Luffy tried.

"No! I've played enough games to know that bars and cafes are

where missions are given! This means that the next part of Baroque Works' plan will be revealed there!" Steven concluded. He waited for that information to sink into their heads.

"...Steven, we knew that already," Nami shook her head. "That was kind of easy to figure out."

A look of disappointment appeared on Steven's face for a moment, but he was undeterred. "Ah! But that isn't the actual plan! That is the set up to the plan!"

"Woah!" Luffy and Chopper clapped their hands, thoroughly and utterly impressed. "Keep going!"

"Well, we ALSO know that Crocodile owns that place in Rainbase. I bet that either Crocodile will hold his evil gathering at that restaurant or the cafe place!" Steven elaborated. "So we need to be prepared!"

"We've got that!" Damian shouted. "What do we DO about it?!"

"I propose that we split up: *Scooby Doo* style!" Steven explained. "The Garnet Group will be comprised of me, Genevieve, Petrea, and Damian going to Spiders Cafe."

The young painter drew quick approximations of the four people near the building in question. Damian and Petrea cocked their heads as they looked at their pictures.

"...my hair does NOT look like that!" the chocolatier fumed.

"I dunno, I look pretty good."

"Our goal will be to infiltrate the meeting with Crocodile, record his plan, and sneak it out to Vivi's dad!" Steven continued. He looked at the painting and examined himself. "I'll be Tiger Millionaire of course, so can you please paint my character to look like that, Genevieve?"

"...okay..."

Sanji lit a cigarette and took a deep breath. "Okay, so what if Crocodile finds out you are trying to undermine him? And why would

'Tiger Millionaire' show up to a secret meeting?"

The young Gem snapped his fingers and pointed back to the canvas. "Ah, I've thought of that! That is where Amethyst Group comes in! That's Luffy, Nami, Zoro, and Usopp!"

Genevieve got straight to work painting while Steven continued with his speech. "Okay, so are you all following along? If something bad were to happen at the meeting, the Amethyst Group will bust in and save us!"

"...how will we know to save you?" Zoro scratched his head.

"We will be wearing a wire!" Steven said proudly. "Not only will we be recording everything on our end, we will have a SECOND wire that will go to you in case something happens to the other one!"

The crew fell silent as they tried to put all of the pieces together. "Steven, I have one question for you," Petrea asked.

"Fire away!"

"...what's a 'wire?'"

\*AGITR\*

"...so then the Pearl group will try to get Vivi back to the castle with the information given by the Den Den Snail thing that you guys will have," the half-Gem wiped more make up off of his face.

It had been over an hour and a half since Steven had started explaining his master plan and the Straw Hats were no closer to understanding how a plan this convoluted would work in any variation. Zoro had whipped out a flask that he was sharing with Damian, Sanji had already smoked five cigarettes, and the only two people who seemed to be amazed at this point were Luffy and Chopper. Even Genevieve, the girl who had professed that she 'believed in Steven,' had stopped drawing Steven's plan and just started free painting on one of her canvases.

"And that, my friends, is how we will save Alabasta!" Steven clapped excitedly. He slumped into a chair and started to pant. "Any

questions?"

It took three minutes for someone to speak. About half of the group had stopped following along completely and the other half had been putting the pieces together with little to no luck.

"So..." Nami rubbed her temples in frustration. "You have created a plan where practically everyone gets captured by Crocodile, who could easily kill us all if he wanted to, and are basing it around the hope that we can not only get several Den Den Mushis in Alabasta that can be used as evidence against Crocodile...but that he will be arrogant enough to leave us alive?"

He nodded.

"And you are going under the assumption that just by meeting all in one place, we can call the royal guard in early? It's not illegal to meet in a public place!"

"But they are evil," Steven countered. "And we will GET the proof!"

"This is not even counting the fact that you as the Tiger...guy...makes no logical sense in the eyes of Baroque Works. Why would Genevieve even BRING a random person to a secret meeting?"

"Because he's the best at what he does!" Steven told her. "Trust me; it will work."

"But you can't just be that optimistic! You need to think of every and every possibility for it! Why..." Nami began again before she was cut off.

"He wants to be the new Mr. 3," Genevieve said.

"What?!"

"Tiger Millionaire will try to prove his loyalty so he can take the spot of Mr. 3," she repeated. "I can endorse him."

"That's GENIUS!" Steven adopted a giant grin on his face. "I'll be there for a try out! It will be perfect!"

Taking a quick swig of his flask, a clearly drunken Zoro stood up. "This might be the stupidest plan we've ever thought of, but screw it! It's bold, straightforward, and will probably kill us all; but damn, it at least there should be a good fight out of it!"

"WHAT THE HELL DOES THAT EVEN MEAN?!" Nami roared at the man.

"I agree!" Damian hiccuped. "I mean, we've got this. I used to be Mr. 5, damn it. Mr. Goddamn. 5. I didn't get that number for being a pissant. I could have been Mr. 1 if I wanted to, but I liked people thinking I was weaker. Made it all the more easier to sneak up on people!"

He rambled on for a few more minutes in a drunken stupor, mainly claiming how manly he was and how the plan was the perfect way to show the world it. While it clearly made the ladies uncomfortable, it did do one thing: roused up Luffy, Chopper, Steven, and the equally intoxicated Zoro.

"Steven, this plan is amazing! Where do I go in and kick Crocodile's ass?!" Luffy asked.

The young Gem thought about it and looked back at the drawings. "Um...in the fourth contingency plan: if we were to get kidnapped by Crocodile and we were left in a death trap, then you would be able to have the rest of Team Amethyst free us while you go stop Crocodile until the royal army can arrest him!"

"Perfect!"

Luffy began to lead Steven in a cheer, egged on by the drunks, the naive reindeer, and the bemused painter. Nami, Vivi, Petrea, Sanji and Usopp, however, looked more worried than excited.

"I don't know whether this is so convoluted that it is brilliant or that it is the worst plan in the world," Usopp sighed. "Who the hell puts all their faith on the chance that a 'bad guy' will have a lapse in judgement?"

"A young, impressionable child," Petrea sighed. "He doesn't know



just what Crocodile can do. He was intimidating when he was just Mr. 0, but as a Shichibukai? I'm mortified beyond belief."

"So, where do we go from here?" Nami asked. She looked at the people who she considered levelheaded (and Usopp). "If Luffy is committed to following this thing, we can't technically go behind his back."

The blond chef lit another cigarette and turned his head back to the canvases. "Honestly, there are some things that can be considered workable. Infiltrating the Baroque Works meeting, however dangerous it might be, seems to be the best option. We aren't going to get a second chance at this...but that's not up to us," he looked at Petrea. "You would need to risk your life Petrea-chan...and that is something I do not feel comfortable with."

The woman bit her lip and gazed down at her trembling legs. She was clearly having an internal debate about it. Vivi moved her seat closer to the chocolatier and nudged her. "Look, you don't have to do anything you're not comfortable with. I can't ask you to put yourself in that much danger like this. We can think of a different way...a better way..."

"No," Petrea gulped, tears in her eyes but a smile on her face. "I told you I would make up for my actions in Baroque Works. If this is what I have to do to save your people, then I'll do it."

"Petrea..." Vivi said weakly.

"Besides," she pointed to her drunken partner. "If he acts half as brave as his boasting, we should be fine."

The ship's resident sniper looked over and chuckled. "Who knows? Maybe Steven will get the other members of Baroque Works to change sides too? He's got three out of four...no pun intended."

The blonde shook her head. "Don't hold your breath. The 'Mr. 1 Pair' are both vicious killers and the 'Mr. 4 Pair' are too stubborn to even think of anything like that."

"That leaves Mr. 2," Nami frowned. "But meeting him was better

than nothing. We at least know how to beat him when it comes that."

This got the group's attention. "Oh? And how can we do that Nami?" Usopp pried.

"Simple: we need to create something...anything really...that will allow us to know if we are the genuine article or merely Mr. 2," the navigator explained. "If he can change into anyone, he can easily sneak up on us and get the rest of our faces. I think he only touched Luffy's face, but we can't be sure. It is better to be safe than sorry."

"That plan is just perfect Nami-san!" Sanji bowed to her. "I am in awe of your genius!"

"So...what do you have in mind?" Usopp asked. "A secret code phrase? A handshake?"

Nami thought about it and looked down to her arm. "I was thinking about something more...concealed."

\*AGITR\*

With Nanohana in sight, the Straw Hats were in high spirits. They were finally about to dock on dry land and they were one step closer to the greatest gift of them all: food. Though it took considerable effort, Nami had managed to calm down her rowdy crew mates and explained her idea to them.

"By tying these to our arms," she explained to them as she passed out pieces of cloth. "We can instantly tell just who is a real member of our crew. From this moment on, we do not say what is under here. We will have no way of knowing who we can trust with that man on the loose."

"Then its decided!" Luffy announced when they all tied their arm bands on. "This will be a symbol of our eternal friendship! Who is with me?!"

"Aye!" everyone called out at once in joyous celebration. It was a tender moment and one that signaled the lasting bond that tied the Straw Hats, the former Baroque Works members, the princess, her duck, and the half-Gem together forever.

Unfortunately, the moment ended the second they landed at the desert kingdom. Luffy took one whiff of the air and started to run, screaming "A RESTAURANT! I'M SAVED!" at the top of his lungs.

"Wait! Come back! I'm hungry too!" Steven tried running after him, leaving most of the Straw Hats behind in confusion.

"Does he even remember that he has a bounty?" Nami smacked her face. "How can he be so brazen?"

"It's okay," Zoro shrugged, ignoring the oncoming daytime hangover. "The kid will keep him in check. He'll be fine."

They nodded and went back to tying up the ship. A few moments later, they stopped working at the same time. "Wait...the kid?!" Zoro realized what had just happened.

"He's only a kid! He can't keep up with Luffy! He's going to get lost!" Petrea wailed. "We need to go after him!"

"Do you have to be so loud?" Damian rubbed his forehead. "I can barely see straight."

"Well whose fault is that?!"

"Guys, Nanohana is one of the largest town in all of Alabasta," Vivi tried telling them. "Do you realize how hard it will be to find them?"

Sanji let out a low chuckle. "Don't worry Vivi-chan, I'm sure Luffy will be at the noisiest spot in the town. If we check there, we'll find him."

"But what about Steven?!"

He rubbed his jaw. "Yeah...at least Luffy stirs up trouble. Steven...shit, that's not good. He's too polite to make a ruckus."

"He also doesn't have any idea about the Marines!" Usopp realized. "Do you think he realizes that we are technically fugitives in the eyes of the law?!"

The sense of dread creeping up on them, the Straw Hats realized just how much of a problem Steven's naivety would be if he wasn't

kept in check. If the Marines were to catch him or Luffy, there would be nobody to stop Crocodile and the country of Alabasta would fall into ruin. As such, only one option presented itself:

"WHY ARE WE JUST STANDING AROUND AND TALKING?!"

Nami yelled as she started to run. "WE NEED TO CATCH THEM!"

The remaining Straw Hat crew ran as fast as they could into the bustling town of Nanohana. Unfortunately, by leaving in such a hurry, they failed to notice a ship that was docked not too far away from the Going Merry.

A boat with a "three" on it.

# The Nanohana Cantina

"Hmm...everything seems normal," Master Chief Petty Officer Tashigi said as she scanned the streets of Nanohana with hawklike perception.

The Marine Officer had joined her superior, Captain Smoker, to the Grand Line to pursue the Straw Hat crew from their post at Logue Town. However, after picking up some interesting chatter on their Den Den Mushi (specifically information pertaining to an organization called "Baroque Works" and a repeated mention of the country of Alabasta), the pair started to realize something big was going on. Capturing a man calling himself Mr. 11 only confirmed Smoker's suspicions, thus diverting their path to the desert kingdom.

As of this moment, this side of the large city had been relatively normal. The captain had gone to investigate a report of a man who died while eating at a local restaurant, so she decided to cover more ground while he worked. While she was here, it was her job to maintain the peace and be the public face for the Marines. So imagine Tashigi's surprise when a boy, who seemed no older than twelve and wearing a salmon pink shirt with a star on it, was frantically looking around the area and growing more and more anxious.

"Hey! Where are you? Anyone? Are you there?" he was calling out. That confirmed Tashigi's suspicion: he was lost.

"Excuse me! Little boy!" she called to him. He stopped and looked around. He then pointed to himself, as if he were confused. 'That's adorable.'

"M...me?"

"Yes, you!" Tashigi walked over to him. "Are you okay? You look lost."

"Well," he said as he shifted around awkwardly. "I really am...in many ways."

"Really now?" Tashigi said, bemused. "Why don't you tell me about it while I help you look for your family?"

The boy suddenly adopted a distant, yet sad look. "My family isn't here."

The Officer raised an eyebrow as she picked up on the boy's sudden tonal shift. "Are you homesick? What brings you to Alabasta?"

Then he did the strangest thing: he chuckled. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Try me," she put on a reassuring smile. Sometimes it was the little changes in demeanor, but Tashigi believed firmly that the Marines were there for everyone no matter what. If that is what she needed to do to help this child, it is what she would do.

"I...I can't," he looked away. "You might be that weird guy. I don't know if I can trust you!"

"Weird guy?" "What's your name?"

He paused before talking again, like he were debating with himself. "Steven."

"Steven, do you know who I work for?" He shook his head. "I'm a Marine!"

Steven merely blinked and continued to look confused and on guard. "...you do know what a Marine is, right?"

"Uh...not really?"

'That's a first,' the bespectacled young woman told herself. "Well, how do I put this? Marines patrol the seas and put the bad guys away to jail!"

"Oh! You are sea cops! Awesome!" he said excitedly. "This is great! Maybe you can help after all! I..."

He had tried to continue on, but his stomach grumbled. "That's right,

I wanted to get food..." Then his eyes widened. "Oh no, I didn't grab any money! Gah! I need some of those berry things!"

It took Tashigi a few moments to catch on to what he was saying when she decide to take matters into her own hands. Seeing one of the men under her nearby, she waved him over. "Officer!"

"Yes, Master Chief Petty Officer Tashigi ma'am!" he called as he saluted to her.

"If you see any suspicious activity, let me know. I'm gonna treat my new friend Steven to some lunch," she smiled at the boy, whose eyes were so wide that she thought she could see stars in them.

"Yes ma'am! Enjoy you lunch!" He returned to his post.

"Come on, Steven. Why don't we have some lunch and you can tell me just why you are in Alabasta?" Tashigi offered him her hand and pointed to a small cantina nearby. "What do you say?"

"Well...my dad always told me not to go with strangers, but also to trust the police! Since you're a sea cop, I guess that'd be okay!" Steven accepted her hand and followed her lead into the small hole in the wall.

\*AGITR\*

Steven was wary at first about this woman, but there was something about her that he found comforting. He couldn't put his finger on it, but he could somehow sense the goodness in her.

Plus buying lunch for a starving boy was a great way to win one's heart.

"So, Steven, do you like your sandwich?" she asked gently.

"Yes, I do! Thank you so much!" Steven replied enthusiastically. "I've barely eaten in days!"

"That's terrible!" Tashigi looked shocked. "Well, don't worry. When I get you back to wherever you are trying to go, I'll have a word about keeping young bodies full!"

"To be fair, we all were starving. Usopp raided our fridge and Sanji was so mad!" Steven tried explaining, before realizing that she would have no way of knowing who they are.

"Usopp?' 'Sanji?' Who are they?"

"New friends I made after I ended up here. Again, if I tell you this, you have to promise to believe me."

She let out a single laugh. "I promise. Trust me, as a Marine I have seen a lot of strange things."

"Okay, but don't say I didn't warn you," Steven took another bite and tried to think how to start the story. "So...I'm not from around here."

"I gathered that. Where are you from?"

"Beach City."

"Never heard of it. What sea is it on?"

'Here it goes: the moment of truth.' "It's...it's not on any sea here. It's on the Atlantic Ocean back in my home dimension."

She nodded. "Ah, that makes sense. It explains why I haven't heard of it." Not even a minute later, her eyes widened as she gave him an incredulous look. "Did you just say 'dimension?'"

The half-Gem sighed. "I knew this was going to happen. Look, I know this sounds strange and weird, but I'm actually a half-human, half-magical alien boy from another dimension."

"...okay, Steven," Tashigi said after a moment. "That's funny, but why don't you tell me the truth? You can't honestly expect me to believe such a...a fairy tale!"

"I knew it!" Steven started to tear up. "I knew you wouldn't believe me! It's just like what Nami and Vivi said. Nobody is going to be able to help us stop that Crocodile guy because everyone thinks he's a good guy!"

It was then that Steven noticed a shift in Tashigi's attitude. In a



matter of seconds, she went from kind to skeptical to utterly blown away. The woman fell out of her chair, scaring the young boy. "Ah! Are you okay?"

"I'm fine! Did...did you just say 'Vivi?' As in Nefeltari Vivi: the princess of this land?!" Tashigi asked incredulously.

"Oh! You know her too?" Steven asked, very much relieved.

"No...I...how do YOU know her?!"

"I've been sailing with her in our pirate ship for the past two weeks!"

"What?!"

\*AGITR\*

Tashigi was beside herself.

This boy had not only innocently admitted to being a pirate to a Marine, but that he had been traveling with the Princess Vivi for over a week! This is not even counting the mention of Crocodile, a man that she knew Smoker distrusted. The amount of questions that were racing through Tashigi's mind was enough to make her dizzy.

This boy...why would he tell a Marine that he was a pirate? Could...could he be telling the truth about being from another dimension? It sounded ridiculous...but it was important that Tashigi found out right away.

"Steven, can you please tell me everything that you know...from the beginning!" Tashigi pleaded.

The boy nodded and took another bite of his sandwich "Okay, but it's kind of a long story."

"I've got time," she countered. "So you claim to be an alien...from another dimension?"

"Half-alien! See, I'm actually half-Gem, which means when I was born my mother gave up her physical form so I could live. All that's left of her is her gem," the boy explained as he pulled up his shirt,

revealing a pink crystal where his belly button should be. "I can also summon her shield and bubble. Petrea and Genevieve thought they were Devil Fruit powers, but they aren't. I can still swim just fine!"

To demonstrate, the boy created a pink shield. Typically, this would be enough to confirm his story. However, traveling with Smoker made her more aware of the type of things that actually existed in the world.

"As, um, 'cool' as that might be, that doesn't explain why you are here in 'this dimension,'" Tashigi used air quotes for the last two words.

"Well, I went on a mission with the Crystal Gems to find this Rifting Stone, but it opened some kind of rift to this dimension! I fell onto a ship owned by these two bounty hunters that were part of this bad group called Baroque Works who were trying to get Vivi and take over the country. But they were actually good guys that didn't know who they were working for and just wanted to follow their dreams! Um..." Steven paused after rushing through his story, trying to find his place. "Where was I?"

"Baroque Works," Tashigi answered, now utterly engrossed in the tale. Regardless if the boy was from another dimension, this was yet another mention of the mysterious "Baroque Works."

"Oh yeah! The misinformed bounty hunters brought me to Little Garden where we met up with the princess and her friends, the Straw Hats who...are you okay?" Steven stopped to help Tashigi, who had choked momentarily on her own spit.

"Did...did you say 'STRAW HATS?!'" she finally spat out. "THAT'S who you are traveling with?!"

He nodded. "Yeah! They are great! Petrea, Damian, Genevieve, and I kinda got accepted into their crew and we are here now to stop Crocodile, who's the secret head of Baroque Works, from causing a war with the rebel alliance...I think. It's really kind of confusing when you think about it," he admitted.

Tashigi tried taking in everything he said at once. This boy had no

way of knowing why Tashigi was in this country, yet everything lined up. The mere mention of the Straw Hats made her blood boil. If they were here, that meant Zoro was as well, including his Meito swords.

"Steven, how sure are you of this?"

"Very," Steven looked serious. "The weird guy I mentioned, Mr. 2, told us where they were meeting and we are going to stop them...but I need to get some of those snail things to make it work."

"Snail...you mean Den Den Mushis!" Tashigi exclaimed. "Why do you need them?"

"I want to record what they are saying so we have proof that Crocodile was behind it all! That way the rebels won't think Vivi's dad is using Crocodile as a fall guy for...well whatever his evil plan is. I don't really know exactly, but it makes Vivi sad."

The Marine was impressed and worried at the same time. This boy, regardless if he were from this dimension or not, was divulging very sensitive material to a complete stranger. Thankfully, Tashigi was a good person, but if Crocodile was planning a widespread eradication of the country, his spies could be, and probably were everywhere.

Tashigi had two options that she could choose from. The first was to arrest Steven on the spot for being a suspected pirate and force him to cooperate. The alternative was to let him go and use him to capture Crocodile, effectively working with pirates.

In order to enforce proper Justice, there was only one possible choice for Tashigi.

The officer rummaged through her coat and pulled out two small wristbands. She could tell that boy had no idea what they were so she explained it to him. "These are two Black Den Den Mushis. They are used for eavesdropping for the Marines. You typically would never find them in a country like this, but I'll make an exception for you." She flipped up the decorative piece on the top of the wristband to reveal a small black snail. "Give one of these to Straw Hat and give the other to whomever is going to the actual meeting."

"THIS IS EXACTLY WHAT I WAS LOOKING FOR!" Steven jumped up in excitement. "THANK YOU!" He took a breath and calmed himself down. "How can I thank you for this?"

Tashigi knew that by giving Straw Hat the Black Den Den Mushis, they could actually spy on his plans as well, giving Captain Smoker the perfect opportunity to capture him. However, it turned out that Steven knew more than Tashigi realized.

"All I ask you is to pass any information to the Marines that could help out in anyway."

"Well, I know that they are meeting at Spiders Cafe in a day and a half at eight at night," he explained after a few seconds of thought. "Oh! And Crocodile owns that restaurant Rain Dinners, so we think that the meeting might get moved there! Do you think that will help?"

"I know it will, Steven. Now..." she started before suddenly finding the boy funny for no apparent reason. "Hahahahaha why...why is this...hahahahaha!"

The boy jumped back in shock. "Are you okay? I didn't even tell any jokes!"

"But that's why it's funny!" Tashigi roared into an uncontrollable fit of laughter.

Steven was clearly confused, but nevertheless joined in the laughter until Tashigi noticed a young girl wearing a hat and pigtails move closer to them. It was apparent Steven knew who she was.

"Steven, what are you doing?!" she cried. "We've been worried sick!"

"But Genevieve, she's..." Steven started to protest.

"A Marine, Steven! Marines hunt pirates! Come on, we've got to get out of here! Apparently Luffy is on a wild chase with a bunch of Marines on the other side of town. I don't know what's going on, but it is too big to even think about!"

"Is she okay?!" Steven pointed to the laughing Tashigi. "Did you hurt her?!"

"No, it's just a Color Trap...Laughter Yellow. All she needs to do is rub the paint off and she'll be okay," the painter frowned. "Can we talk later? We really need to get back to the ship!"

The girl grabbed the boy's wrist and pulled him away from the Marine. He waved to her as he moved out of sight. "I'm sorry for this! Thank you again for lunch and for the help! I still think you are nice!"

Tashigi, through the cloud of laughter, normally would have thought the boy was mocking her. However, deep down she knew he was being sincere. He might not be as bad as Zoro, but Tashigi now believed that it was her responsibility to get him away from the Straw Hats.

But first, she needed a good laugh. The whole situation was just so hilarious to her.

\*AGITR\*

"And where the hell were you?!" a light blue-green-haired man asked Tashigi.

After laughing for a good fifteen minutes, one of the other Marines that didn't rush after Straw Hat Luffy and his crew heard the laughter of his superior and wiped the painter's paint off of her back. After being filled in about Captain Smoker's fight with the Second Division Commander of the Whitebeard Pirates, the woman made her way to her Captain as fast as she could. As usual, he was seen chomping on a pair of lit cigars.

"I was incapacitated by a Straw Hat pirate I have never encountered before!" Tashigi reported. "I heard you were attacked by Portgas D. Ace. Do we know why he is here?!"

"Looking for Straw Hat apparently," Smoker groaned. "Pull yourself together; you look terrible."

She adjusted herself and tried catching her breath. "You have to excuse me sir. I've been laughing for a very long time and..."

"Save it. We have bigger problems. The Straw Hats are apparently traveling with a 'Vivi.' Sound familiar to you?"

"I have an idea of what is actually happening, captain," Tashigi explained before relaying everything she just went through to him.

The man frowned and crossed his arms. "Dimensional traveling? A princess with pirates? A pirate willingly working with a Marine? Why is it that the only thing that makes sense is that Crocodile is involved with this?"

"Sir? You believe the boy?" Tashigi was clearly surprised by that revelation. "You really think he might be an alien from another dimension?"

"I don't know or care about that! What I do care about is that we are now privy to information about this 'Baroque Works' including where and when to catch them. We don't have much time to plan this out but now we've got some leverage on our Mr. 11."

He took a large drag from his cigar and cracked his knuckles. "I do know one thing for certain: Straw Hat Luffy will not be the one to topple Crocodile's criminal empire. I will personally bring that traitorous bastard to Impel Down myself if I need to!"

# The Desert Kingdom

By the time Steven and Genevieve returned to the Going Merry, the ship was still empty. Though they appeared to be safe, it was readily apparent that there was something wrong with Steven. He was surprisingly distant and quiet as the pair made their way through Nanohana, something that freaked Genevieve out a bit.

Fittingly, Steven took the quiet moment to speak his mind to his friend. "Genevieve, I don't get it! What was that for?!"

"What was what for?" she asked, getting increasingly worried about the boy.

"What you did to Tashigi! She was a nice sea cop and wanted to help us out! Why did you use your paint on her?"

Genevieve blinked in confusion before realizing exactly what was going on. Steven was probably holding on to the ideals of his home dimension, where police probably only went after criminals. He didn't quite get that, technically, they WERE criminals in this world. Regardless of the noble intentions of the Straw Hat crew, they still operated outside of the law. As nobody else was around, it was up to Genevieve to explain it to him, something she was not looking forward to.

"Steven...when you think of being a pirate, what do you keep thinking of?" she began.

He thought about it for a second and his eyes grew wide. "Oh, you mean '*pillage, plunder, rifle, and loot*'? What does that have to do with my question?"

"Have...have you ever thought about exactly WHAT you are saying? As in, do you know what it means to pillage, or to plunder, or any of those things?"

Steven was silent for at least a minute and it looked like he was debating with himself internally. Finally, he gave the painter puppy-dog eyes that made the girl feel more miserable than she felt in her

entire life. "Are...are we bad guys?"

"In the eyes of the law, yes," she whispered with a sigh. "But think about it, Steven...there are a lot of bad people in charge of this world. You don't know about the corruption or slaves or even who Celestial Dragons are. Why do you think the idea of our own country was so appealing? It's a bad world out there."

"But...but I'm a criminal," Steven muttered in shock. "I deserve to go to jail!"

Genevieve had enough and grabbed him by the shoulders. Steven was not used to the typically laid-back girl showing such energy, and Genevieve was surprised to be so...lively. "For what?! Of anyone on this ship, you are the absolute LAST person to be saying that! You have practically turned the lives of three criminals around, you helped overthrow a tyrant king, and you are selflessly risking your life to save a country you have never been to for people you have met maybe two weeks ago! Why? Because you think it is the right thing to do!"

The painter took a deep breath and puffed out her rosy cheeks. "Steven, we all like you because you are a good person. If you ever...*EVER* think badly about yourself like this again, I will abandon my dream right then and there."

"Why?" the boy asked, completely enthralled with her passionate pleas. "What does that have to do...?"

"Because you are an inspiration! A painter without inspiration is nothing at all!"

Before she could go any further, Steven ran over to her and hugged her. Trapped in a bear hug, Genevieve found herself at a loss. This was...different. However, she found that "different" was actually kind of heartwarming. "Don't give up on yourself Genevieve!" he cried into her arm.

"Don't beat yourself up," she replied.

"So...was Tashigi a bad guy or...?" Steven asked before getting



distracted by the oncoming group of people rushing toward the Going Merry. It soon became clear that it was the Straw Hats running for their lives. "It's the guys! Yay!"

"I'm guessing Straw Hat really did cause a problem in town," Genevieve sighed. "Still, what's the princess doing?" The pigtailed girl pointed to a blue-haired shape bending down and talking to a giant yellow shape, clearly Vivi and Carue. The duck then ran off in another direction while the Straw Hats jumped on board their docked ship.

"Get on and raise anchor!" Sanji yelled. "Luffy, you idiot! You led the Marines right to us!"

"Wait! We can't leave yet! Where's Steven?!" Usopp cried. "We never found him!"

Nami looked around as she ran. "Genevieve's not here either!"

"Damn it!" Zoro cursed. "I'll go back for them!"

"Ahoy!" Steven called to them. "We are up here!"

"STEVEN!" they called to him. Genevieve's face turned bright red as her eyebrow twitched. "Hmph."

Now knowing that all of their crew, save Carue, was on board, the ship sailed off from the port at Nanohana. The first thing they did when they got back on the sea was, naturally, yell at Luffy for his reckless actions in town.

"You caused the Marines to come directly at us!" Nami yelled. "You could have gotten us killed or worse! You need to stop thinking with your stomach and start actually thinking things through!"

"But Nami, how was I supposed to know Smokey would be there? It just smelled so good!"

"You're just lucky that fire guy was willing to fight Smoker off!" Usopp shook his head. "Who was that guy anyway? A friend of yours?"

The captain began to laugh uncontrollably. "Oh! That's Ace! He's my

brother!"

"Oh, sorry for the confusion," Usopp sighed. Then his eyes widened as he comprehended exactly what Luffy had said. "WAIT WHAT?!"

"YOU HAVE A BROTHER?!" the crew exploded at once.

"Yeah! He sailed out to sea three years before me! I was hoping to meet up with him one day, but I never thought I'd see him in Alabasta! That's amazing!" Luffy was clearly pumped up and excited.

"Did he eat his Devil Fruit before he went out to sea like you did?" Petrea asked. "It's uncommon for two family members to have them, especially if you both left years apart!"

"Nope," Luffy explained. "I didn't know he ate one! Still, even before I got control of my Devil Fruit power, he could easily beat me up! I wonder how strong he is now!"

As the crew mulled over the implications of a person who could go toe to toe with Captain Smoker and could apparently beat Luffy in a fight, Steven started asking Luffy to describe his brother. "He's super strong and ate a fire Devil Fruit! You should have seen him!"

"Speaking of, where were you anyway?!" Nami interjected. "You can't go running off like that Steven; you have a worse sense of direction here than Zoro does, though at least you can write that off as not being from this dimension!"

"Oy!" Zoro shouted. "Keep me out of this!"

"I'm sorry!" Steven blushed. "I got lost and ran into this Marine named Tashigi and we had lunch and..."

The sound of Zoro tripping stopped Steven in his tracks. "Tashigi?! As in the Marine with the glasses?! Why would you go out to lunch with HER of all people?!"

"You went to lunch...WITH A MARINE?!" Nami asked flabbergasted. "WHAT WERE YOU THINKING?!"

"Stop ganging up on me! I didn't know any better!" Steven cowered behind Luffy. "When have we ever talked about Marines?!"

The Straw Hats looked to one another and couldn't find a response to that. "...okay, fair enough. Steven, never talk to another Marine again!" Nami sighed, rubbing her temples.

"Um...I'll try."

"ESPECIALLY HER!" Zoro added.

Usopp took a seat and slumped over, still trying to catch his breath from the earlier chase. "Do we even want to know why you had lunch with a Marine? Actually, I bet there is a good story behind it, so start talking!"

"Well..." Steven bit his lip and thought back to his lunch. "She wanted to help me because I was lost and I explained to her...well...everything."

"When you say 'everything...'" Usopp's eyes grew wide. "What do you mean?"

"Vivi, Baroque Works, Spiders Cafe, my home dimension...you know, everything!" the half-Gem noticed the look of panic and dread on nearly every Straw Hat's face, the only ones excluded being Luffy and Chopper. "Was that a bad thing?"

"YES STEVEN! THAT WAS VERY BAD!" they all yelled at once.

"What if there was a Baroque Works Agent in that cantina?" Petrea started to pace. "This country is in a civil war and we know that Baroque Works has a major presence here...what if they overheard you?!"

"A better question is what if Tashigi arrested you for being a pirate?!" Nami shouted. "You can't just go around giving away all of our plans, Steven!" The navigator paused when she noticed Steven beginning to whimper. She crouched down so she could be level with him. "Steven, I don't mean to yell...I know you didn't know any better, but we just want to help you learn. It's hard being a pirate here. Do you understand?"

He nodded. After a moment, he snapped his fingers and went through his pockets. "Oh, I almost forgot! She wanted to help us! She gave me these!" Steven then presented the Black Den Den Mushis to the group. "These are basically that wire thing I was talking about, Petrea!"

"A Black Den Den Mushi?" Usopp examined the little snail bracelet. "It's so small. Why would a Marine give a pirate these?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Nami put her hands on her hips. "This is just a way for the Marines to take down Crocodile themselves."

"Is that a bad thing?" Steven offered. "Couldn't we use all the help we could get?"

"You don't understand the Marines, kid," a new voice interjected. "Sure, you might get a nice but stubborn old man every now and then, but nearly all of the ones you will come across are assholes."

The pirates turned to acknowledge the new person on the ship. He was shirtless and wore an orange hat and a red necklace. On his arm was an odd tattoo that Steven couldn't really make out. He had a smile on his freckled face. Luffy started to clap his hands in excitement. "Ace! It's you!"

"Well of course it's me! Didn't you get the message I left for you in Drum Kingdom?" the young man frowned. "Actually never mind. You might not have even ended up on that island. So..." Ace surveyed the various people on the ship. "It seems I have you all to thank for taking care of my idiot brother."

"He's not an idiot!" Steven defended him. "He's amazing!"

Ace frowned. "Is that what you all think too?"

"Yes. He is amazing," all of the Straw Hats said at once.

"You're telling me that this knucklehead hasn't gotten you into trouble at all?"

"No. Never."

The fire man started to laugh. "You guys are good people! Luffy, you found a good bunch! So, are you going to introduce me to your crew or what?"

"Oh yeah!" Luffy hit his head. "This is Zoro! He's our swordsman! Nami here is our navigator and thief! Usopp is our liar..."

"SNIPER! I AM THE SNIPER!" Usopp interjected angrily. "GET IT RIGHT!"

"Sanji is our chef. He's the best cook I have ever seen!" Luffy laughed.

"Stop, you're making me blush," Sanji said sarcastically. "Are you hungry? If you are anything like your brother, I'd be surprised if you weren't."

"Nah, I don't want to impose," Ace waved it off, but put his hand out to light Sanji's unlit cigarette with his finger. "Sorry, it went out."

"Hey, Ace! Meet Chopper! He's a talking reindeer and our doctor! Then there's Vivi, who is a princess! Oh, and this is Petrea! She's kinda a member of the crew, but she makes really good chocolate!"

Ace cocked his eyebrow. "How can you be 'kinda' a member of a pirate crew?"

"Oh, she's helping us bring down her old criminal organization! I mean..." Luffy turned to Petrea, Damian, and Genevieve. "Would you guys join my crew? Officially?"

The three grew silent and started to blush for being put on the spot. It was Damian who found his voice first. "Let's bring down Crocodile first and then we can talk about it. Any objections?"

The two ladies shook their heads. Luffy hung his head down in sadness. "is Damian. He's our bomb guy. He's kind of mysterious but we like him anyway. She's Genevieve, a painter who can hypnotize people. Finally, that's Steven!" Luffy pointed to the smiling Steven waving to them. "He's our half-alien musician from a parallel dimension! We even fused once!"

"Hi!" Steven greeted him.

"Hello yourself, little man. Seems like you've got quite a cre..." he paused as he took in everything Luffy just said. "Wait, what does that even mean? Actually, do I want to know?"

"No. No you don't," the Straw Hats answered him in unison.

"Hey!" Steven was clearly offended, but Ace ruffled the boy's hair.

"Fair enough," Ace laughed. "I'm sure you'll tell it to me another time, Steven. So Luffy, I was excited to hear that you got yourself a bounty. That's part of the reason why I sought you out! I want you and your crew to come with me and join my crew!"

"You have your own crew too?!" Steven asked excitedly. "Where are they?"

"Judging from the tattoo on your back, I'd say that you are a part of the Whitebeard pirates," Zoro frowned.

"WHAT?!" Usopp jumped out of his seat in shock. "THAT THING ISN'T FOR SHOW?!"

Luffy's brother merely continued to smile. "It is my most prized possession. Whitebeard is the man I'm going to make the Pirate King, Luffy. Will you help me with my dream?"

"Fat chance!" Luffy retorted. "You know that I'M the one who is going to be the Pirate King!"

The freckled faced pirate couldn't help but laugh at his brother. "Well, I had to try! Still, that's why I'm even still here. I'm looking for a dangerous pirate called Blackbeard, a former subordinate of mine. He killed one of our crew mates, which is the worst sin a pirate could ever do. It's my job to find him and finish him off."

"Wait, Blackbeard? Did you say Blackbeard?" Steven asked curiously.

Ace adopted a serious expression on his face. "I did. Do you know anything about him?"

"There's was a Blackbeard in my world too. He used to be one of the most notorious pirates ever. When people think of pirates, they think of him! Well..." Steven thought about it. "He's the REAL one people think of. There's also Long John Silver, Captain Hook, Jack Sparrow..."

"What was his name?" Ace asked. "Do you remember his name at all?!"

Steven shook his head. "I don't know! Um...sorry. I'm really bad at this stuff. If Connie were here, she'd be able to help you."

"Oh well," Ace sighed. "It was a long shot. Still, take this anyway." Ace pulled out a piece of paper and threw it to his brother. "This is a vivre card. You can use it to find me in the future. You know, having an idiot brother like you makes an older brother like me worry."

The Whitebeard pirate scanned the entire Straw Hat crew and adjusted his hat. "It's a good thing he's got good people like you to watch his back for me. Luffy, we'll meet again sooner than you think!"

He jumped off the side of the boat and landed into his own personal one-man ship. "It was nice meeting you all!"

"Wait! Ace, why don't you join us for a bit?!" Luffy called to the man as he sped away.

"I can't! I have to go now! My planet needs me!" Ace laughed. He charged forward toward a large group of Baroque Works ships that were converging on him, apparently trying to claim the bounty on his head. In a single attack, Ace burned their ships to the ground, surprising the Straw Hat pirates immensely.

"HE'S SO POWERFUL!" Usopp said in awe.

"He's so polite too," Nami added. "Is he really related to Luffy?"

"I hope those people aren't hurt," Steven scanned the water for any signs of life preservers. "They are going to be okay, right?"

"...yes, Steven. I'm sure the people burning will be okay," Genevieve

said sarcastically.

"Phew," Steven wiped the sweat off his forehead. "That's a relief. I was worried for a moment."

"Oh, I almost forgot," Nami said. She went over to a pile of clothes that were purchased in town. "I wanted to give this to you before, but we got distracted. After all, every musician needs an instrument."

She handed Steven a small ukulele, causing the boy to jump up and down with stars in his eyes. "Really?! You found one! Oh my gosh! Thank you, Nami!"

"Watch out kid, she'll charge you 300% interest," Zoro laughed as the boy started to tune the instrument, with Luffy crowding around him egging him on.

"Not this time. I never had a chance to thank Steven for healing me back at Little Garden. It's the least I can do," she smiled. "So, are we going to hear a song or not?"

"Let's hear your favorite song...the one about you and the Crystal Gems," Petrea offered. "Now that you have the proper instrument, it should be good!"

And so Steven sang his song while members of Baroque Works burned all around him. It was truly a sight to behold.

\*AGITR\*

After a short amount of sailing, the Going Merry finally reached shore. Given the extreme heat, all of them had to change into the clothes Sanji and Nami picked out for them. Everyone brought the essentials with them, including water, spare food rations, and Steven's ever important Cheeseburger Backpack containing his old clothes, his new ukulele that he somehow got to fit in it, and the Rifting Stone, which was presently being ignored until the Alabasta crisis was over.

Vivi had explained that they had landed in a town called Erumalu, also known as the Green Town. Unfortunately, the name no longer fit the description as the entire area was in ruins.



"This town was once teeming with wildlife. Plants of all varieties grew here...but we haven't had a single drop of rain in the past three years. No rain means no plants..." Vivi elaborated while the crew walked around the sand filled town. "The only place in all of Alabasta that received rainfall was Alubarna, the country's capitol. Shortly after that, a large shipment of Dance Powder appeared in Nanohana and our country has been in constant turmoil since."

"Dance Powder?" Luffy asked. "What's that?"

"It's a powder that creates a mist-like smoke that can create artificial rain," Nami tried to put it in simple words for her simpleminded captain.

"Ah! We understand!" Zoro and Luffy nodded in unison.

"But wait," Steven chimed in. "Wouldn't artificial rain be a good thing for this country? Why wouldn't your dad use it in the places that are experiencing a drought?"

"You couldn't have known this since you aren't from around here, but Dance Powder is very illegal," Petrea explained. "All of the rain has to come from somewhere, so it basically steals the rain from neighboring countries. Since the capitol was the only place getting rain..."

"...then all of Alabasta would think that your dad was stealing the rain!" Steven put it together. "This is seriously bad!"

"Yeah!" Luffy nodded. "Vivi, your dad is a monster!"

Sanji and Damian went to strike Luffy at the same time, but knocked into each other and fell to the ground. Instead, Usopp did the honors. "Think Luffy! Her father is being framed by Crocodile!"

"WHAT RIGHT DOES CROCODILE HAVE TO DO THIS TO MY PEOPLE?!" Vivi shouted, finally breaking down. "I WILL NEVER, EVER FORGIVE HIM FOR THIS!"

Petrea helped the sobbing teenager up off of the ground and gave her a smile. "Then it's time to take this to him, isn't it?"

She sniffled and blinked. "What?"

"I'm familiar with this area," she explained. "Spiders Cafe is roughly equidistant from Yuba at this point. We've had to report there before. The owner, Paula, is nice enough on her own but knows not to ask questions. I think we can make it there in time. Plus Yuba is closer to Rainbase anyway..."

"Hold on," Damian rubbed his head as he got up from the desert floor. "We aren't actually following Steven's plan, are we?"

"We are?" Steven and Genevieve asked at the same time. Steven was more touched than Genevieve, who was actually a bit nervous but chose not to show it.

"Why not? We've got the Den Den Mushis and if we can show the rebels that Crocodile is behind it all, it might end the war in our favor before too much blood is shed," Petrea smiled.

"Even me?" Steven asked shocked. "I don't have to stay behind or anything?!"

"Kyahahahaha! Well, it's your plan silly," she laughed. "Don't we need Tiger Millionaire and his ridiculous Cheeseburger Backpack to make this work?"

Steven reflected back to the beginning of this adventure, when Garnet tried to get him to stay home only to let him come as long as he brought his Cheeseburger Backpack. He wished the Gems could see him now, taking part in adventure bigger than practically anything they had gone on at home.

He wondered if they would be proud of him.

"What's the matter Damian? Not brave enough to face our old comrades?" Petrea joked with her former partner.

The human bomb adjusted his sunglasses and folded his arms across his chest. "A real man is always ready for such things!"

"Wait, let's think this through!" Nami interjected. "You guys could get killed! If we don't stick together..."

"This is our fight, Nami. We've gotten our hands dirty before. I'm sure we can handle anything."

"You couldn't handle us back in Whiskey Peak," Zoro pointed out.

"HEY!" Petrea jumped in the air and kicked the swordsman in the face. "Rude much! Steven, give your Black Den Den Mushi to Luffy...actually give it to Nami. She has a better chance of getting exactly what we are doing."

"But if we are in Yuba with the rebels, what would happen if Crocodile and the other bad guys attacked you?!" Chopper asked in a panicked voice as Steven dug for the little bracelet in his Cheeseburger Backpack.

"Simple, Chopper," Sanji got up and adjusted his suit. "We will be waiting in Rainbase at that shitty Croc's casino. A real man is always there to save a damsel in distress."

"Oh Sanji, you really would?" Petrea fawned in a false, breathy tone that made Sanji's eyes turn to hearts and Damian's blood boil.

"He's hopeless," Usopp sighed. "So is this it? Are we really parting ways here?"

Luffy pulled up his arm and pointed it to the group. "We aren't parting anywhere! We'll meet back up again when I kick Crocodile's ass! Who's with me?"

His outstretched hand was alone for several seconds, before Petrea joined it with her own covered arm. She was followed shortly by Steven, Zoro, Chopper, Genevieve, Damian, and Sanji. Nami rolled her eyes and put out her arm. "You guys are idiots, but who am I to stop you?"

"Vivi?" Steven asked the only remaining person left. "We can't leave without you! Are you ready to take back your country?"

The others looked to her, as if waiting for her permission to begin. Finally, the princess wiped away her tears and joined her arm in the circle, completing the chain.

"I'm ready!"

# The Eight O'Clock Meeting

The desert heat hit Steven harder than any feeling he had ever had. He thought the weather on Drum Island was harsh, but this was on a completely different level. 'Now I know what it is like to live on Tatooine,' he told himself.

The quartet of companions had gone over the plan several times by this point, but every time they brought it up, a new flaw was discovered. In the end, nobody wanted to tell Steven that the plan wasn't as thought-out as he made it seem. However, there was no turning back now and the former Baroque Works members did not want to damage the boy's pride, even with their lives on the line.

They owed him that much...or so they told themselves.

*"The sun is high and the sand is dry and we are almost to the place; where we have to go for we all do know it is Baroque Works that we face!"* Steven played his ukulele to keep the positive energy going. *"Though we do not see where we are gonna be we know it is time to say; 'Let's do this fast, because we've got to last the walk to Spiders Cafe.'"*

Putting away the instrument after his verse, the boy concentrated on the desert path ahead of him. Every dune looked the same and it made Steven realize just how exhausted he really was. How long had they been walking? Hours? Days? Years?

"How much further is Spiders Cafe again?" Steven panted. "I'm losing track of time...the heat...THE HEAT!"

"Steven, we just went over this ten minutes ago before you started your song. We are at least a good hour walk away," Petrea muttered as she wiped the sweat off her brow.

"Conserve your energy and hold off on the music," Genevieve offered weakly. "It makes it easier."

The trek continued on for several more minutes before Damian stopped and needed to sit down. The others, taking his lead,

decided to rest for a second as well to catch their breath.

"Do we have any water left?" Damian groaned. "I'm dying over here!"

"For your information, no! We don't! Do you know why we are out of water?!" Petrea snapped. She closed her parasol, which she was using to block the blinding sun, very angrily. "Because you just HAD to chug our canteen without consulting us!"

Looking offended, Damian ripped off his sunglasses and got up into Petrea's face. "Oh, is THIS where you want to go?! Blaming everything on me is SURE to solve all of our problems, won't it?"

"Hey, maybe we should all calm..." Steven tried to interject before he was cut off by his fuming companions.

"Blaming would imply that I'm trying to shift the blame off of myself and putting it on you! No, I'm beyond blaming!" she poked the parasol in his face. "I'm accusing you, Damian! For all of your boasting, what have you added to this entire situation?!"

The man swatted the parasol out of the way and stood his ground. "I'm sorry! Do you not remember me risking life and limb to help you get up a mountain when you were flailing around sick and out of control?! I thought not! Did you see her help you out then?" He pointed to Genevieve, who stepped back a bit.

"Don't get me involved in this!" she warned.

"We'll look at this! The painter doesn't want to get involved!" Damian laughed. "I never would have guessed that!"

"What is your problem, Damian?!" Petrea roared. "Why are you acting out like a spoiled child?!"

"Child? Do you know what my problem is? My problem is that we are an hour away from staring death in the face! My problem is that we have no chance of stopping Crocodile by ourselves! My PROBLEM is that this will never work and you all know it!"

The tension in the air could be cut with a knife. Petrea was teething

with rage and irritation, Genevieve put her head down in the hopes that it all would end soon, and Steven just sat there as if he were punched in the gut.

"Don't deny it! We screwed ourselves over the second we left the others!" Damian threw his hands up. "We are hopelessly outmatched and outgunned!"

"Do..." Steven asked after a moment. "Do you really mean that?"

"Steven, think about it! We. Are. Dead! Dead! This is what happens when we follow a..." Damian started to complain before Petrea slapped him in the face.

"Not. Another. Word," she warned. "If you open your mouth again, I promise you that the next time I hit you it will be with 100 kilos of pure anger!"

"You..." the bomb man stumbled backwards. "You hit me!"

The two former partners continued to yell and scream at each other for several minutes. The entire time, Steven just stared at his friends and thought about the ramifications if they were to fail. Everybody would be dead. Vivi's country would fall to ruins. Crocodile would have won.

And his family would never know where he ended up.

Steven's first instinct was to blame himself and write the whole thing off, but something in him gave him strength. Something in him allowed him clarity beyond his years. He knew exactly what he was fighting for and he knew why his friends had to be afraid right now. However, he also knew that this was the right thing to do no matter what.

It was time to show the others that.

"THAT'S IT!" Steven stood up and yelled at the top of his lungs. "STOP IT!"

The two adults stopped their arguing immediately and stared at the boy, who looked both hurt and incredibly angry; an interesting sight

to say the least.

"Look, I know it's hot and I know that this is scary, but we are all losing sight of why we are doing this in the first place! Don't all of you feel bad for the things you did under Baroque Works? All the people you hurt, stole from...even killed?" he reminded them.

"Doesn't Vivi's trust in us matter anything to you? Doesn't MY trust in you?! If you guys are scared, you aren't alone! I'm nervous too. I'm nervous that I will never see my family again. But I'm not about to let that stop me! If you guys want to keep arguing, I'm not going to stop you," Steven managed to get out without crying. "But I'm going to be the good guy here, even if I'm doing it alone!"

Ignoring Petrea and Damian's shocked looks entirely, Steven marched right past them and kept moving on towards Spiders Cafe. Genevieve immediately got up and ran up to the boy, both confused and a little irritated herself at the situation. "Steven, what are you doing?!"

"What my mom would do: the right thing!" Steven kept up his pace.

"Walking into a Baroque Works meeting by yourself is a death trap!" Genevieve tried to reason with him. Then she stopped herself and shook her head. "Okay, let me back that up. Walking into that meeting with only me by your side is a death trap!"

Steven blinked and smiled for a second before stopping and regarding his friend. "You're still with me?"

She nodded but frowned. "I told you I believed in you, but I don't want to be the one who lets you get yourself killed!"

"I'm not! I'm proving something!" Steven admitted. "I know they won't just stop when they came this far, no matter how angry or upset they are. They just need to snap out of it and realize what's important before it's too late to do anything about it!"

"You...you're teaching them a lesson...by putting your life on the line?" Genevieve was now more lost than concerned.

"Garnet does stuff like this all the time when Pearl and Amethyst



nag at each other," Steven explained as he marched. "I still have faith they'll stop whatever that is and save it for after the mission."

The young painter was speechless at the sudden burst of maturity the boy was displaying. This was something she was unaccustomed to in the time since she met him. Yes, he often gave advice that could often be construed as constructive, but this was something else entirely. Genevieve had to admit that she was impressed. "You're odd for a boy."

"And you're weird for a painter," Steven retorted. "Come on, let's walk a little faster. If I'm right, they should start running to catch up to us aaaaaaany..."

"WAIT!" the voices of Damian and Petrea yelled in unison.

The two young ones stopped and turned back around. Damian was running as fast as he could to catch up while Petrea had used her parasol to jump up and float down toward them. Steven flashed a quick smile to the former Miss Goldenweek before adopting a stern expression. Genevieve, on the other hand, just stared at the half-Gem with her jaw open, shocked at how well the boy could read the situation.

"I'm an asshole! Don't leave me behind!" Damian was shouting. "I didn't mean it! I'm sorry Petrea! Petreaaaaaaa!"

"Oh shut up and do something about it!" Petrea yelled back. She landed on the ground in front of Steven and Genevieve and bit her lip. It was incredibly obvious that she was embarrassed by what just happened. "Steven...Genevieve...you know that..."

"No wait!" Damian panted as he finally caught up to them. He tried to catch his breath in an exaggerated manner that the two kids couldn't honestly tell if it was for show or how he actually felt. "I screwed up first! I should apologize first!"

"But I got here first!"

"I feel worse about it than you!"

"That's subjective and you know it!"

As they growled at each other one more time, Steven gave a quick cough. The two blinked and realized exactly what they were doing again, causing them to both bow at once. "We're sorry."

"I know," Steven went over and gave them a hug. Petrea nudged Damian softly and he returned it, albeit awhile his face was beat red from utter embarrassment. "Are we all going to be okay?"

"We'll be fine, Steven," Petrea reassured the boy.

"I won't," Damian muttered. He looked at the others, who made it very clear that he had to choose his words carefully. "I can't take this walk without some music to keep the pace. What do you say kid? Got another verse of your marching song?"

"Do I?!"

As Steven played more of his impromptu song, Genevieve noticed Petrea and Damian whispering to each other. She debated for a minute on listening in on the two no doubt making up with each other, but she decided that it was too much work.

Besides, the song was too catchy for her to shift her focus truly away.

\*AGITR\*

Sometime after the group's quarrel, Steven began to notice a change in the desert landscape. The sand plains of Alabasta managed to somehow produce new life in the form of grass growing out of a rocky terrain. It was a testament that even something as minute as grass could stir such excitement in a boy Steven's age.

"Grass...does this mean we are near the ocean?" Steven asked.

"It's even better than that," Damian wiped a tear away from his eye. "It means that we are finally here! Oh thank god!"

Sure enough, in the distance was a small little building made of wood with a water tower beside it. Steven and Damian grabbed hands and began to dance in a circle. "We made it! We made it! We made it!"

"Um...shouldn't we be going over..." Genevieve asked as she gawked at the odd display going on in front of them.

"Let them be for a few moments," Petrea sighed. "I think they earned it."

After reeling them in, Genevieve took out her paints and helped Steven get into his character. "So you wanted three whiskers on your cheeks?"

"No," Steven shook his head. "This is too important. Make it...*four!*"

"Are you sure you can handle it?"

"I have to...for Vivi's sake."

Behind him, Damian wiped away a single tear. "Damn it man; that's dedication!"

"...for a man who was complaining not even two hours ago about how we were all going to die, you seem to be rather calm," Petrea pointed out.

"You do realize that we are following an inexperienced kid from another dimension who is asking a hypnotist painter to paint his face like a tiger, right? Don't begin to judge me right now!" Damian picked his nose. "How I cope with oncoming assignments is between me, myself, and I!"

"...you do know I've worked with you for over two years, right? Don't think I've forgotten the times you look at yourself in a mirror to hype yourself up."

"You're just jealous," Damian adjusted his desert robes. "Kid? Are we doing this or not?!"

Draping a poncho pulled out of his Cheeseburger Backpack over his outfit, Steven was dressed for success. His hair slicked back, his face painted, and his ukulele by his side, Steven bent down and picked out a piece of grass and stuck it in his mouth.

"Tiger Millionaire was born ready."

The four made their way toward the small building side by side. Each of them had a look of determination on their face. They knew there was no going back.

Petrea went to open the door and paused for a moment. She was nudged by Steven who gave her a smile. She took a deep breath and adopted a wicked look on her face.

It was time to get back into character.

"Kyahahaha! Are we the first ones here?" Petrea announced as she strode her way into the small shop. There was a counter with a few bar stools around it and three small tables on the opposite side of the room. Behind the counter was a thin bespectacled woman with her blue hair wrapped up in a bandanna.

"Oh, Miss Valentine! I was beginning to think you weren't showing up!" she told them. "Good to see you Mr. 5."

"Paula," Damian gave a curt nod. "Been a while."

"That it has," the barkeep put her hands on her wide hips. She then noticed Genevieve trailing behind them. "Miss Goldenweek! How are you doing? Where's Mr. 3 and...oh my."

Steven had stepped into view and took a seat at the bar next to Genevieve. Paula gave a look of pure confusion and shock at the sight of this young child wearing face paint sitting at her bar. "Um...may I ask who this is?"

"TIGER MILLIONAIRE!" a familiar voice called from the other side of the bar. Twirling over to them, Mr. 2 looked positively overjoyed to see the young half-Gem and his companions. "YOU CAME TOOOO!"

"Mr. 2," Steven nodded in his fake voice, before throwing his arms open. "Oh who am I kidding? Come here, you old ballerina!"

The two embraced like true friends, despite Steven meeting him only once. Paula looked at them and shuddered. "What...can anyone please explain just what is going on here?"

"Paula darling, this is the ever fierce bounty hunter Tiger Millionaire! He saved Painter-chan, Blondie, and Sunglasses here after Waxy was killed by giants! Then they and a bunch of Millions saved me a few days back!" Mr. 2 cried manly tears. "Seeing you here makes my heart feel light as air!"

"Tiger...Millionaire?" Paula asked. "I don't get it."

"Oy! All the questioning is making my joints hurt hurt hurt!" a new voice cried from a table. A middle aged woman with red frizzy hair and purple glasses was getting her back rubbed by a very large, lumbering man.

"Shadddddup, Crone!" Mr. 2 yelled at her. "What do you know about anything?!"

"New people!" Steven said excitedly before coughing, forcing himself to keep up his tough guy voice. "I guess these are more of those people you were telling me about, Miss Goldenweek."

"That's Miss Merry Christmas and her partner Mr. 4," she nodded. "Paula, do you have any green tea? I'm thirsty."

The woman nodded, but never took her eyes off of Steven. The boy noticed this and mentally forced himself to avoid looking like he was panicking. "And what about you 'Tiger Millionaire?' What can I get for such a 'grizzled' bounty hunter like yourself?" Paula asked carefully.

"Just a water, ma'am," Steven replied courteously. "The desert heat always takes a toll on me."

"...I see..."

"Sooooooooo," Mr. 2 slammed his hand on the counter. "How did your battle with Purple Puma gooooo?"

"It hasn't happened yet," Steven kept the character going. "The Kessel Run got postponed so here I am with nothing to do! It's why I'm still tagging along with Miss Goldenweek and the 'Mr. 5 Pair' here."

Damian snorted. "Don't sound so enthusiastic, Millionaire, or else I'll be forced to show you how a true man can deal with a Kessel Run."

"Kyahahahaha! I'd pay to see that," Petrea laughed heartily.

"I'm sorry, but I can't say that I have ever heard of a 'Kessel Run,'" Paula frowned. "What exactly IS that?"

The boy snorted. "Smugglers and bounty hunters have to capture a target in the shortest amount of time and distance. I happen to be the best: under twelve parsecs!"

"I see..." Paula was still clearly very suspicious of this newcomer and his apparent knowledge of a lot of the workings of Baroque Works. It was important for the quartet of people to not acknowledge those misgivings at all or else be exposed to more detailed questioning. "Well, I wish you good luck on your quest. What are your plans now, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Me?" Steven laughed. "I'm going to ask your boss to be the new Mr. 3!"

The other Officer Agents in the bar stopped everything they were doing to regard the boy with the ridiculous face paint. Sensing the tension, Genevieve decided to speak up. "It was my idea. I'm without a partner and his partner parted ways with him at Little Garden. He's proven trustworthy and effective. I'd rather him be my partner than just a random member of the Millions or Billions."

"Hey!" Miss Merry Christmas snapped. "If Mr. 3 is dead then Mr. 4 should be the new Mr. 3!"

"I don't care," Genevieve sighed. "It's a lot of work for just me...and I hate work."

"Well, what can you do then?" Miss Merry Christmas asked. "If you want to be one of us, you need to fit a theme!"

Steven looked to Genevieve who nodded. "It's true."

"Well..." Steven snapped his fingers. "We are both artists! She paints and I sing!"

"...really?" Paula put her hands on her hips. "Sing us something, music man."

"Make something up!" Miss Merry Christmas demanded. "Sing about you!"

"Well, Tiger Millionaire? Can you do it?" Petrea asked with a wink.

"OF COURSE HE CAN!" Mr. 2 defended him. "He has the heart of a true soul! Play it proud! Play it true!"

Steven nodded and grabbed his ukulele out from the Cheeseburger Backpack beneath his poncho. He took a few moments to tune it, talking to himself as he worked. "Millionaire...without a care...black hair...underwear..." he muttered.

Finally, he stood on a barstool and started to play to a wary audience. Using his foot to keep the time, he began to sing. *"I am the very model of a cunning Tiger Millionaire! I pillage and I plunder the world government without a care! I am the best at what I do, that's something no one can deny! I clawed my path all by myself in the great jungle coconut mines."*

He took a second to take a big breath before he continued. *"If you try to stop me I will hit you with my pink Gem shield! In the ring it's no hold barred; I'll find a way to make you yield! In the Outer Rim I fought and took all of the jungle on..."* He stopped and stared at his captivated audience.

Steven put his hand on his hips and started to pace theatrically. "Hmm...jungle on...jungle on...GOT IT! *You'd best watch out Purple Puma! I'll beat you until you are gone!"*

He started to dance in a circle, where he was joined by a crying Mr. 2. *"You'd best watch out, Purple Puma; I'll beat you until you are gone!"*

*"You'd best watch out, Purple Puma; he'll beat you until you are gone!"* Mr. 2 sang after him.

*"You'd best watch out, Purple Puma; (he'll/I'll) beat you until you are you are gone!"* they sang in unison, much to the bewilderment of the

Baroque Works Agents.

*"For my jungle combat knowledge is not matched in this here desert land. If you try to match wits with me I'll be forced to go and play my hand. In short, for your new Mr. 3 I'll tell your boss right then and there, the only solid choice for it is simply Tiger Millionaire!"*

*"The only solid choice for it is simply Tiger Millionaire!"* Mr. 2 sang out with him.

*"It is simply...Tiger...Millionaire!"* they both belted out, finishing the chord with a bow.

Steven looked around the room to gauge his enemies' and comrades' reactions. Paula looked utterly baffled, Mr. 4 was laughing very slowly, Petrea was smiling at him, Genevieve raised a single eyebrow, and Damian was fighting back laughter. The only person he couldn't read was Miss Merry Christmas.

Finally, she got up and applauded. "Kid, I have no idea what the hell that was, but you've got my vote!"

\*AGITR\*

Day turned to night as the promised eight o'clock meeting approached. Somehow, Damian managed to keep his composure as Petrea did most of the talking with Paula. The majority of attention was on Steven, as expected, but he was keeping himself together as he truly immersed himself in his Tiger Millionaire persona.

The "Mr. 4 Pair," though occasionally irritated with the level of noise and enthusiasm Steven brought to the table, did not seem to mind the face painted Gem. Mr. 2 was closer to him than he was on the Going Merry, which made it hard for Steven to view him as a bad guy. The one person who seemed wary of Steven was Paula, but that didn't bother the boy. She was only a bartender.

It's not like she was part of Baroque Works or anything.

"So there we were, facing the Notorious Order of Wrestling Haters, and Purple Puma and I were forced to work together to take them



down. Suddenly, out of nowhere, Dashing Danny and Handsome Hank joined us to take Captain Square and her companion down a couple pegs!" Steven laughed in merriment.

Mr. 2, Petrea, Damian, and Mr. 4 all laughed together at the stupid pun while Miss Merry Christmas critiqued a drawing of the desert sky that Genevieve was working on. Just as everything seemed to be winding down a bit, a man was thrown through the wall.

'A typical sight in bars,' Steven concluded as he forced himself not to react with terror.

"What?!" Mr. 2 yelled in anger. "Why did you boys come flying through the wall?!"

"Oh, you know them," a low voice called from the outside. "They were moving suspiciously out in the desert. Don't worry, they won't die. I can tell you are close with them, no matter how foolish that may be."

A large, muscular man with a shaved head appeared from the hole and for the first time, Steven was truly afraid. This man in his black, sleeveless coat and loose pants was a terrifying sight to behold. 'This is the first really evil looking guy I have seen yet...could he be Crocodile?!'

Mr. 2 stepped up from the floor and gazed at his battered companion. He growled and twitched his mascara covered eyes. "You...those were MY MEN! GAH!" The ballerina lunged at the newcomer and began to kick at him. **"Un! Deux! Kuraaaa!"**

The man dodged the rapid kicks and threw several punches at the okama, all of which he dodged gracefully. **"Un! Deux! Oraaaaaa!"** He tried to throw a series of karate chops and kicks at the newcomer, but he was just as nimble as his opponent. Finally, Mr. 2 managed to land a kick square in his tattooed chest, sending him straight for the wall. Amazingly, the man did not break through the wall but instead sliced through it like a knife through hot butter.

The other Officer Agents were in shock of the seemingly random events happening. Who was this man and why would he attack Mr.

2's friends? Regardless, they all ran outside to assist Mr. 2, but Paula got between them first.

"Mr. 1, calm yourself at once! I'm putting a stop to this before you destroy my bar more than you already have!" she demanded.

"Get out of my way, Miss Doublefinger! I'm going to kill this okama bastard!" the scary man growled.

Petrea sat herself down on Mr. 2 and increased her weight enough to keep him from moving, all while taking in Paula's familiarity with the man apparently known as Mr. 1. As such, she was the first one to realize what was happening before it was made clear.

"You will not! Calm yourself down, Mr. 1! You as well, Mr. 2! Don't you know what time it is? It's already past eight o'clock and we have our orders from the boss," Paula smiled. She took off her bandana and her glasses, allowing her poofy blue hair to be free.

"We are to report to Rainbase, The City of Dreams, at once. It's time for us to finally meet the 'boss' we have never seen...are you all ready?"

The Baroque Works Agents stared in shock at Paula, or, as she was revealed to be, Miss Doublefinger. The barmaid was not just a Baroque Works sympathizer, she was the highest ranking female Agent behind Crocodile's unseen partner.

'Uh oh,' Steven thought to himself. 'This isn't good.'

\*AGITR\*

Not long after the shocking reveal of the true identity of the "Mr. 1 Pair,": a giant turtle wearing a cowboy hat while smoking a cigar showed up pulling a coach. The Agents entered it one by one with Steven being the last one allowed on.

Paula had objected to his presence, but in the end was overruled by the other member of Baroque Works. This included Mr. 1, who could care less and just wanted to get to Rainbase. It was a particularly tense ride for the quartet of companions. The ladies seemed to be holding themselves up better than Damian, who chalked up his

nervousness to excitement over meeting the boss. Thankfully, Mr. 2 was just as energetic, so it wasn't noticeable.

Steven, doing everything he could to keep himself in character, started to fiddle with his ukulele before getting a death glare by Mr. 1, causing him to put it away. He stared out the window, wondering how Luffy and the others were doing. He hoped they had picked up that they were heading to Rainbase on his concealed Black Den Den Mushi. So far everything had been proceeding as the Straw Hats had anticipated, but once they got to Crocodile, anything could happen.

Finally, the tense trip concluded and the Agents found themselves in a large spacious room with a large dining table set for each of the Officer Agents by a large staircase. Steven made sure to sit close to his friends as he watched Mr. 2 dance on his chair.

"I just LOOOOOVE to spin all day!"

"Shut up, you damn idiot!" Miss Merry Christmas yelled. "You are acting up my poor hip!"

"Kyahahahaha!" Petrea laughed. "What doesn't cause your hips to seize up these days?"

"Ha. Ha. Ha. Ha," Mr. 4 laughed slowly before getting hit by his partner.

"Hey! You don't get the right to talk to me like that like that like that!" the woman retorted back.

"Why does she sometimes repeat things?" Steven whispered to Genevieve.

"Because she's old," the painter responded, slightly shifting in her seat.

"I HEARD THAT, BRAT!"

"But it's true."

"Would you all please calm yourselves?" Miss Doublefinger

remained impassive. "The boss will be here any minute."

"That he will, Miss Doublefinger," a new female voice called from the top of the stairs. She wore a cowboy hat and a long white coat. Steven thought that there was something different about her...something in her eyes.

"Miss Allsunday," Mr. 1 nodded.

"Welcome, everyone, to the City of Dreams: Rainbase! You have all been brought here below the largest casino and restaurant in the city: Rain Dinners. I..." Miss Allsunday stopped and cocked her head curiously at Steven, who waved. "Why, hello there stranger. And who might you be?"

"They call me Tiger Millionaire!" Steven said after a second, trying to find his voice. He was nervous beyond all belief at this point, but he had come too far for Vivi's sake to let that stop him.

"Ah, the same 'Tiger Millionaire' who assisted us with our 'Straw Hat Problem?'" Miss Allsunday pried. "I must admit, this was not scheduled on the briefing. And what can we do for you today, in our mixed company?"

The boy stood up and put his hand out to shake hers. The woman, confused yet amused, accepted the handshake with a small smile. "You are short one Officer Agent and I've come to plead my case to your boss."

"Partner," Genevieve whispered.

"Partner!" Steven rectified.

The woman gave a short chuckle and looked to Miss Goldenweek. "And who is the missing Officer Agent then?"

"Mr. 3, of course!" Steven told her. "He died back on Little Garden and I've been helping Miss Goldenweek and the 'Mr. 5 Pair' ever since to repay my debt. I want in! I can be useful to you guys! I even helped save Mr. 2's life before! So..." Steven smiled. "What do you say, Miss Allsunday? Can I at least plead my case to the boss?"

"Plead your case?" a low, booming voice responded from the chair at the head of the table. "Oh Tiger Millionaire, you are going to have to do more than that."

The chair spun around and revealed a middle age man smoking a cigar. He had hair slicked back behind his ears and a scar running on his face. His most striking feature, however, was the giant golden hook for a hand.

The sight of this man caused the Officer Agents to freak out all at once.

"Crocodile?!" Mr. 1 spat out.

Mr. 2 fell out of his seat in a comical manner. "Is this a jooooooke?!"

"Why is a member of the Shishibukai here?!" Miss Doublefinger asked.

"So this must have been your secret that the princess found out," Petrea forced herself to act surprised.

"Wait, THAT is our boss?!" Damian panicked. "It's a government trap!"

"Trap?" Crocodile laughed. "Not exactly. But since you brought it up, I do have some questions that I was not intending on asking."

"Hooooold on! Have we seriously been working for a pirate all this time?!" Mr. 2 interjected.

The hooked man shot him a dark look and frowned. "Does anyone have any objections with my leadership?"

Not a single Officer Agent responded, but Steven started to chuckle. His friends' mouths were wide open with fear. "And what, pray tell, does our unexpected guest find funny?"

"Your name is Crocodile and you have a hook for a hand!" he laughed. "That's amazing!"

Crocodile got up in anger before sitting back down, calming himself

with a new cigar. "Amazing? An interesting phrase Mr. Millionaire. Do you know what that word means? It means 'greatly surprised,' similar to how I feel right now by your presence."

"Forgive my presumptuous attitude," Steven bowed. "It's something I do and I need to work on it."

"I agree," Crocodile laughed. "It's a shame you won't have time to do that."

Fear swelled up inside Steven's chest, and he did everything in his power to not let it show. "What...what does that mean?"

"Since our little chat on the Den Den Mushi, I have been using my government contacts to try to gain any information on you and your absent partner that I could. Did you know what I found out about you?" Crocodile asked venomously.

"I can explain that incident at Tosche Station..." Steven tried to keep the act together as best as he could.

"Nothing. Not a mention. Not a whisper. It is almost as if 'Tiger Millionaire' doesn't exist," he leaned back and took another drag from his cigar. "Still, I was willing to give you the benefit of the doubt. Secrecy is a valuable trait in this organization and if one such as yourself could manage to stay under the radar for so long, then I would have no issue allowing you a place in my new utopia."

The half-Gem looked to his friends and saw the color drained from their faces. This was the deciding moment and they knew it. Would they be found out or would this work out in their favor?

"You mentioned to my partner that Mr. 3 is dead and you want his position, is that right? And that you have been traveling with both Miss Goldenweek AND the 'Mr. 5 Pair' since Little Garden?" Crocodile asked, sitting back in his chair to survey his underlings.

"Well, yeah..." Steven stood his ground. "That's why I tagged along and..."

"I see. So tell me this, if Mr. 3 is dead, why was he seen roaming around Alabasta with a caravan of women not even a day ago?!"

Crocodile flashed a deadly smile.

It was in that moment that Steven's optimistic attitude vanished entirely and for the first time, he truly feared for his life and the life of his friends.

"Care to explain that... 'Tiger Millionaire?'"

# The Sea Stone Cage

The hidden room beneath Rain Dinners seemed as if it were about to become an unmarked tomb for Steven Universe. Here he was: staring death in the face and having to choose how to handle the situation.

On one hand, there was nothing that could be done. Steven was found out by Crocodile and he was surrounded by the various Officer Agents of Baroque Works. Escaping was clearly a lost cause. On the other hand, he was not alone. Damian, Petrea, and Genevieve were right there with him.

However, Steven was conflicted. They could potentially get out of this and still be a part of Baroque Works as double agents. Of course, this would require Steven forsaking them at the cost of his own life. Is that something a young child could handle doing?

To Steven, there was no question of what he would do.

"So, he's still alive? I thought I finished him off," Steven sighed. "I guess I wasn't as thorough as I thought."

"St...Tiger, what are you talking about?!" Genevieve asked, clearly shocked.

"What can I say, Miss Goldenweek? I'm a millionaire; I always want more. I saw what your organization was offering. I saw an opportunity and got greedy," Steven laughed. "I played you three like a harp; not like you'd know Croc, having one hand and all."

The man in question started to laugh. It was a chilling sound and one that sent shivers down Steven's spine. "Well, well; you've got a lot of balls, kid. You break into my meeting and manipulate my people to suit your own needs. I'm impressed. Very impressed. It almost makes up for that ridiculous face paint."

"Impressed enough to let me in despite Mr. 3 being alive?" Steven asked and hoped for the best. If Mr. 3 was alive, he would no doubt inform Crocodile about how Genevieve lied on her Den Den Mushi



report. Perhaps there was a way to salvage this after all.

"Let you in? You seem to be under the illusion that I will let you leave here alive. However..." Crocodile surveyed the room and locked eyes with the terrified Genevieve and shifted his gaze to the equally mortified Petrea and Damian. "I do have to thank you for something. By integrating yourself within my organization, you have shown me a fatal flaw: that my own men can be tricked by a child!"

"What...what...?" Steven blurted out, unable to respond coherently.

"Mr. 2 is understandable, as he had no idea who you were beyond the information provided by Miss Goldenweek, but the rest of you are incompetent if you believed this boy!" the Shishibukai roared as he slammed down his hook on the table. "That is unacceptable. However, I am in a rare mood. Tiger Millionaire, if you can kill these three weaklings, you may have a place at this table!"

He motioned toward the "Mr. 5 Pair" and Genevieve. "As for you three, remind me why you deserve a second chance! Go on!" However, as he slumped back into his chair, he adopted a serious look to his face. "Alternatively, I can kill all four of you right here. So, what is it going to be?"

Steven looked as pale as a ghost. He was willing to sacrifice himself to let his friends finish the mission, but Crocodile had outsmarted him. This was literally a no-win situation. Besides, even if they were to actually engage in combat, Steven knew enough about bad guys that the winner would probably die anyway.

"So you're telling me that you lied to me?!" Genevieve got up and slammed her chair. Steven had never seen her so angry. There was a fire in her eyes and it scared the half-Gem. "You told me he was dead! Was all of this just a way for you to sink your claws into me to...to further your own goals?!"

"I don't...Genev..." Steven started to plead before Petrea and Damian also stood up to surround him. Their faces were dark and their expressions grim. Petrea grabbed Steven by the face and picked him up. The boy was utterly lost and confused. What was happening?! Was this Crocodile's doing?!

"We trusted you! We let you in! We helped you get over the abandonment of your stupid partner, and THIS is how you repay us?!" Petrea snarled.

"You screwed up, kid. Any last words before I blow your brains in?" the bomb man started to pick his nose.

"I...I..." Steven closed his eyes, ready to accept the inevitable before repeating what they were saying back to him in his head. His eyes widened and just as he realized exactly what they were doing, Damian threw his explosive snot directly at Crocodile.

### **"Nose Fancy Cannon!"**

The man jumped out from his seat and charged with great speed at the quartet of friends. Before he could reach them, Steven instinctively activated his bubble and surrounded the four in its protective shield. Crocodile struck it with all of his might, but Steven's will was stronger than the man's anger.

"A pink bubble? An interesting development, but futile nevertheless! I do admit, I am disappointed in you all. You could have had a high ranking place in my utopia. Instead, I'll just have to use you as an example to everyone in this room to show what happens when you defy me," Crocodile sighed. Steven was unnerved by this. Yes; the man was angry, but he wasn't taking this seriously.

Was he just that confident in his power?

Crocodile nodded to Miss Allsunday, who walked over to Crocodile's chair and pressed a button, causing the floor from beneath the bubble to disappear. Steven looked down and up. "This is gonna stiiiiiiiiiiiiinnnnnnnnnnkkkkkkkk!" he cried as the four of them fell down the trapdoor.

The bubble burst upon impact on the floor below. Rubbing his head, Steven stared around. It appeared that they were completely underwater but in a solid stone room with glass walls. Shapes moved around in the water that gave off a frightening shadow. He couldn't tell exactly what they were, but one look at the others told him that they knew exactly what they were about to face.

"Are you okay, kid?!" Damian ran over to help him up.

"I'm fine," Steven accepted his hand and rubbed his head.

"What...what happened?"

"We gambled on outsmarting Crocodile and lost," Petrea sighed, looking petrified at the swimming shapes. "I'm sorry for grabbing your face, but if you ever do that again, you will be in trouble!"

Genevieve grabbed Steven's poncho and pounded her fist on his chest. "How could you try to sacrifice yourself to save us?! Didn't you know how stupid that would be?!"

"I did it for..." Steven started to say before stopping himself. He realized that Crocodile and the others still did not know that the Straw Hats and Vivi were alive. If he mentioned Vivi's name, they would be in trouble. "I didn't want you hurt for taking me in."

"Kid, we were going to hurt no matter what. Even if you died, we would have been hurting more than you ever could imagine," Damian frowned. "As it stands, I don't think now is the time to reflect of this..."

The sounds of movement stopped the former Mr. 5 mid-sentence. A giant shadow made its way toward them, finally revealing itself to be a giant golden alligator that could swallow all four of them whole. On the top of its head was a small birthmark that resembled a banana.

"Oh! That must be one of those banana gator things you were painting!" Steven said in awe as he looked upon the salivating creature. "Now I know what it looks like!"

"STEVEN, NOW IS NOT THE TIME TO ADMIRE THE CREATURE THAT IS TRYING TO EAT US!" Petrea yelled in a panic. She jumped up in the air to try to stop it in its tracks. **"10,000 Kilo Press!"**

Her body fell on the beast with such great force that it momentarily collapsed on the spot. Petrea looked happy at her victory, but the beast started to move again, angrier than ever.

"I gave that thing everything I had and it still isn't down!" Petrea

panicked. "What are we going to do?!"

"Wait! Genevieve, use your paints!" Steven pointed out. "We can use them to make it our friend!"

"Good thinking! Give them to me!"

Steven blinked as he backed away from the oncoming banana gator. "Me? I don't have them! You were using them back at Spiders Cafe!"

"Didn't I give them back to you?!" Genevieve asked, starting to freak out a bit.

"No! We all got distracted by Mr. 1!"

"Oh," Genevieve sighed. "Then we are screwed."

"Don't say that!" Steven shouted. "I know we can do it! I know!" Steven summoned his shield and held it in his hand. "We!" He threw it at the banana gator was now charging at Petrea, striking it in the lower jaw. The banana gator flew up and revealed its stomach as the shield started to return to Steven. "Can!" He jumped up to hop on top of the returning shield and used it as a catapult to get further in the air. He created a second shield and prepared to hit the gator dead on in the chest.

Seeing this happen, Petrea jumped up again and grabbed the boy. She increased her weight as they plummeted down on top of the animal, knocking the wind out of the mighty creature. "Do it!" Steven called out, finishing his earlier declaration. Before it hit the ground, Damian shot another booger at him, sealing the deal but not killing the animal. The two then jumped off of their fallen foe and high fived each other.

"That wasn't so bad!" Steven proclaimed. "Now let's get that codfish!"

"Good idea, but there is just one little problem though," Damian looked around. "There doesn't seem to be a way out unless you swim!"

"Then it's a good thing I know how to!" Steven told them. He surrounded the three in a bubble and led them to the entrance to the pool of water. He threw the pink ball in, took a deep breath, and pushed it as hard as he could.

Steven prayed that he would be able to find the strength to get his friends up the full way. He knew that there were other banana gators around and he hoped that they were too far away to deal with them. The other factor was Crocodile himself. If he was watching them, then he would have seen exactly what they were doing. But since there didn't appear to be a way to see what was happening in that room when he was in it, Steven was banking on Crocodile being distracted by the meeting.

Struggling to see underwater, Steven could only make out shapes and lights. He was following a small square that, as he got closer to it, appeared to get brighter. His oxygen supply drained and running on fumes, the boy felt like he was about to pass out.

But he still pressed on for his friends' sake.

Amazingly, he reached the square of light and pushed his shielded friends out. Knowing they were safe, Steven closed his eyes and drifted to sleep in the water. He did it. He earned this.

Didn't he deserve to rest just for a second?

\*AGITR\*

The next thing Steven knew was that he was getting punched in the stomach.

His eyes widened and he began to cough up water out of his lungs. His vision was blurry but he tried to make out who hit him. Could it have been Crocodile?

"He's awake! Finally!" the familiar voice of Genevieve rang in his ears.

"Gen...Genevieve? What...what happened?" Steven tried to speak, but found that it was painful.

"Oh Steven, you wonderful boy, you did it!" Petrea gave him a hug before being ripped away by Damian.

"The kid just drowned! He doesn't need to get suffocated by your chest!"

"Drowned?" Steven tried to look around, but his visioning have been off. All he could see were straight lines. It was almost as if he were in a jail cell.

But that couldn't be right, could it?

"By the time we got out of the pit, the meeting was already over," Petrea explained. "The other Agents either moved to another room or Crocodile gave them the short, short version of what happened. Regardless, when you collapsed, the room was practically empty."

"I collapsed?"

"You drowned in the water kid," Damian sat down next to him and stretched out. "Genevieve went back in after you." Steven looked to the painter, who had removed much of her wet clothing and was drying off with a towel around her shoulders. "The only problem was that we weren't alone. Miss Allsunday had stayed behind just in case. She threw us in this cage so Crocodile could interrogate us later or something."

"She didn't throw us back to the gators or let us drown?"

The young painter shook her head. "No. In fact, she gave us towels to dry us off and to get you to feel better. Imagine that?"

"She did?" Steven smiled weakly. "I knew there was something I liked about her."

"Don't start singing her praises kid. We are locked in a sea stone cage with no way of getting out," the bomb man sighed as he rested his head on the wall. "That means we can't use our powers on it and are weak if we grab the bars. Basically, we are screwed...but a different kind of screwed."

"A fine way of putting it," a voice called from the staircase. Steven

now realized that they were definitely in the hidden room from before, but in a cage he didn't notice. Steven stared at the stairs and recognized the person coming down almost immediately.

"Codfish!" Steven cried. "It's you!"

Crocodile just stopped and raised an eyebrow. "I've been called many things before: 'savior,' 'hero,' 'executioner,' and 'bastard' more than once in my life. I can honestly say I've never been called a 'codfish.' You have yet to cease amusing me, Tiger Millionaire."

He returned to his place at the dinner table and lit another cigar. "I had expected your Devil Fruit powers to do a considerable job against the banana gators I call pets, but I planned on you all drowning when I eventually flooded the lower level," Crocodile explained. "So imagine my surprise when Miss Allsunday told me you managed to swim back to here all by yourself. You clearly don't have Devil Fruit powers, Mr. Millionaire, so why don't we start with that?"

"Start?" Petrea asked. "What do you mean by that?"

"What I mean, Miss Valentine, is that we have all the time in the world to talk while your former peers carry out my orders," he answered as he leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. "In a few mere hours, this country will collapse and you will all be dead. As such, I intend to take this time to find out exactly what you four thought you could accomplish."

"So you just expect us to talk?" Damian took a deep breath.

"No, he expects us to die," Steven shook his head. "Didn't you guys know anything about being a bad guy when you were still Baroque Works Agents?"

Crocodile laughed once again. "You are feisty for a brat, I'll give you that. But are you so naive that you still see the world as either good or evil? Doesn't someone with your 'experience' realize that there is more to it than that?"

"What I know is that everybody is inherently a good person deep

down! That's what my mom believed about humans and that's what I believe! You might get lost along the way, but there is almost always a chance to be forgiven in the end!"

"Really? Is that how you see me? A lost soul in need of redemption?"

The half-Gem squinted his eyes and grabbed the sea stone bars. "I see a man who needs to go to jail for all the terrible things he has done to this land. You want to know why I'm here? It's not for wealth, fame, or power. It's to stop you and save this land and its people from all the things you have done to hurt it!"

Crocodile let out a hollow laugh. "It seems that you are the rarest of the rare: an idealist. Very rare indeed. There's a reason for that. I see punks who try to follow their dreams on these seas nearly every day. Do you all know what they have in common?" Crocodile asked.

"The fact that you saw them?" Steven asked with a shrug.

"They all are dead! There is no ambition anymore! There is no reason to dream! The only way to achieve your objective is with pure power and military might! That is why Operation: Utopia is going to succeed while you die together in a cage."

He then regarded that former Baroque Works members and frowned. "Is this why you betrayed me? You felt bad after killing the princess and wanted to make up for it after listening to this idiot's stupid speech? It surprises me that a pair of ruthless assassins such as you, Mr. 5 and Miss Valentine, could even dream for something as ridiculous as 'redemption!'"

"Just because they were deceived into thinking that they were building a place to fulfill their dreams doesn't make them bad guys!" Steven argued intently.

Worrying, Damian went to pull him back but immediately dropped down for being too close to the sea stone bars. "Kid...don't!"

"And what does that mean?" Crocodile asked intently.

"It means I know that you are trying to overthrow this land, kill



everyone, and then probably wage war on the world!" Steven created a shield and tried to throw it at Crocodile through the bars. The shield hit the man, but it went through him. Steven was in shock. He had guessed that Crocodile had eaten a Devil Fruit, but his shield just phased through his body without him flinching.

"As expected, you can still control your power despite the sea stone. Very interesting indeed. For someone who appeared out of nowhere, you know more than you should possibly know. I'm going to ask you this once before I stop being nice: what is your endgame?" Crocodile moved toward the cage while clenching his one good fist.

The half-Gem, scared and weak, flashed a goofy grin. "I told you: I'm going to stop you and save Vivi's country!"

The comment stopped Crocodile dead in his tracks. "What did you say?"

"I'm going to honor Vivi's wishes and bring you down!" Steven stood his ground. "I don't know how I'll do it, but I always save the day! Trust me, I always find a way."

Crocodile went strike the boy through the cage with his hook before he stopped midair. A sound had distracted him: Miss Allsunday coming down the stairs with an urgent look on her face. The head of Baroque Works regarded her with puzzlement as he tried to read her expression. "Miss Allsunday, what is it?"

"Hi, Miss Allsunday! Thank you for the towel!" Steven waved, much to Crocodile's disdain and the other's astonishment. Steven thought he saw her smile, but it was just for a moment.

"I'm sorry for interrupting," she looked at her boss about to strike down a child in a cage and frowned. "But there is a disturbance upstairs in the casino."

"So? Let the Koloa Mercenaries deal with it. I'm in the middle of a very important conversation."

"I can see that, but a group of pirates and a pair of Marines have

stormed the casino, both chasing after each other and demanding to see you," she worded carefully. "I'm not sure how you would want to handle this."

"Pirates and Marines, eh? Just kick them out and be done with it."

"But Crocodile...one of the pirates is Straw Hat Luffy," she finally revealed.

The small amount of color that was left in Crocodile's face drained from it. "Straw...Hat..." He looked into the cage and glared at Genevieve, who hid behind Damian in fear. "You...lead them to the V.I.P. Room now! I want answers! Then I want you to search the area to see who else is here!"

The Shishibukai looked like his world was falling apart. He stepped away from the cage and sat down in his chair in disbelief. For several minutes he was silent and even Steven didn't dare to taunt the man who was realizing just how badly he miscalculated his plan. "You haven't been on your own this entire time, have you Miss Goldenweek? Suddenly I understand the bigger picture."

He smashed his hook into the table so hard that the edge of it splintered off into dozens of pieces. "If the Straw Hats are alive...then Princess Vivi is in this country!"

On cue, several figures fell into the cage from the floor above. Steven was pleased, as he recognized most of them at once. Luffy, Zoro, Nami, and Usopp had fallen on top of Damian and Genevieve. Following them was, surprisingly, Tashigi and a man Steven had never seen before.

Still, Steven clapped his hands and ran over to them. "Guys! You came to rescue me!" Steven then looked over to Tashigi and smiled. "You're here too! This is great!"

"Not so great that we got led into an obvious trap!" she muttered as she flung a look at Zoro and Luffy.

"It was fiendishly clever!" Luffy argued. "Say, where are we?"

"So, I was right. You are all working together," Crocodile frowned.

"Though I am not sure what surprises me more: that you pirates are alive or that you have allied yourself with Captain Smoker. Still, I should have known that you of all your peers would not trust me at all. Your tenacity precedes you."

"And your reputation is enough to keep me on my guard around scum like you," the man with the cigars growled back.

"It's a shame that you and your young partner here died in a glorious battle against the vicious Straw Hat pirates," Crocodile sighed. "I'll be sure to tell your superiors that you died honorably."

"Wait, YOU'RE Crocodile?!" Luffy stopped helping Damian up, causing him to slip to the floor, and moved to the front of the cage. "Then YOU'RE the one who stole that old guy's water and hurt Vivi's country!"

"I'm glad we could clear that up," Crocodile smirked. "So, is this the part where you tell me I need to go to jail for my heinous crimes?"

The Straw Hat started to crack his knuckles in both anger and excitement. "No; this is where I tell you I'm going to kick your ass!"

"Language!" Steven whispered.

The Shishibukai blinked and laughed a hearty laugh. "Are you now? Well; I will congratulate you and your crew for not only making it this far, but for deceiving me for so long. I truly thought you were dead until you made your little scene upstairs. You should have stayed it; you might have kept your life."

"So...what now, Crocodile? Are you going to kill us?" Smoker pried.

"No, not yet. I'm still waiting for Miss Allsunday to retrieve the guest of honor."

The crew looked to each other in confusion. One by one they realized exactly who he was talking about. The only two out of the loop were Smoker and Tashigi, the later of whom grabbed the bars and began to shout. "Who are you talking about?!"

"Why, Princess Vivi, of course," Crocodile put put his cigar. "So why

don't you sit back and relax? You aren't going anywhere."

"Well..." Luffy crossed his arms. "If we aren't...then we need to pass the time..."

Still overjoyed to be reunited with most of his friends, Steven gladly got the message and took off his still wet novelty backpack. He made a mental note to thank Miss Allsunday for letting him keep it as he pulled out his prized ukulele, which had thankfully not suffered any lasting damage in the fall.

"What...?" Smoker asked incredulously. "You aren't serious right now?"

"This one is for you, codfish!" He started to strum his instrument and smiled to his friends (and Smoker). *"Never smile at a crocodile! No, you can't get friendly with a crocodile! Don't be taken in by his welcome grin; he's imagining how you'd fit within his skin!"*

Luffy, Usopp, Genevieve, and Damian started to clap along as Petrea tried to console a furious Nami. Smoker just tried to ignore everything happening around him and focused on Crocodile, while Tashigi just tried to figure out why everyone was so calm and not taking this seriously. She stared down at Zoro, who appeared to be asleep, and controlled an urge to slap him in the face.

As for Crocodile, he just kept on smoking his cigar as he allowed these fools their last moments of life.

*"Never run, walk away! Say goodnight, not good day! Clear the isle and never smile at Mr. Crocodile!"*

\*AGITR\*

"Hey! Who stole all the meat?" Luffy asked while putting his fingers to his mouth like a cigarette.

It had been about an hour since getting trapped in the sea stone cage. The occupants had more or less resigned themselves to the fact they weren't leaving anytime soon, so they decided to start playing impressions.

"Haha! That's Sanji! Good one, Luffy!" Usopp smacked his knee.

"Now you go, Usopp!" Luffy smiled.

The long-nosed teenager thought about it and finally decided on his impression. "Kyahahahaha! Look at me! Sanji and Damian love me, but I'm going to string them along with my feminine charms!"

Petrea got up and punched Usopp into the bars of the cage, her face red with anger and embarrassment. "You're just lucky I can't change my weight or that would have hurt a lot more!"

As they were playing, Steven had set aside his ukulele to talk to Tashigi and Smoker for a moment. "I'm still really sorry for everything that happened before."

Steven looked over to Genevieve, who bowed her head. "My bad."

"It's very rare for a pirate to apologize for escaping a Marine," Smoker commented. "What's your angle in this?"

"My...angle?" Steven asked confused. "Um...to be your friend?"

"Steven!" Nami walked over and scolded him. "What did we talk about?! No talking to the Marines, and most certainly do NOT try to be friends with them!"

"But they seem to care enough about this country to try to save it from codfish over there!" Steven pouted. "Besides, you guys are just doing your jobs! I can't be mad at you for that!"

"...you aren't a typical pirate at all, are you, Steven?" Tashigi smiled. "You shouldn't be traveling with these criminals. It's dangerous."

"Who are you calling dangerous, Marine girl?!" Nami got in her face.

"You and your outlaw crew, pirate!"

Steven started to panic. "Guys! Please stop fighting!"

"Gah!" Usopp cried, still tending his wounds. "There's no point in fighting each other when we are all locked up together!"

"He's right," Crocodile commented from outside of the bars. The sight of him made Steven's blood boil. He still wasn't taking any of this seriously as he ate a meal seemingly for the express purpose to taunt them. "You're all going to die here anyway. Why not enjoy your last pathetic moments together?"

"You seem awfully confident, don't you?" Nami sneered. "Don't you know that the second you open this cage, our captain is going to kick your ass?"

"YEAH! NOW OPEN IT ALREA..." Luffy, getting energized by Nami's boasting, grabbed the sea stone bars and immediately fell backwards with all of his strength drained from him.

"And this is supposed to frighten me? You are nothing but a rookie punk who thinks he can take on the world," Crocodile sighed. "A dime a dozen I'm sad to say. The world won't miss any of you."

"That's what you think," Luffy laughed.

"Oh? And what makes you say that?"

"Not. Telling!"

Crocodile rolled his eyes and started to cut another piece of his dinner when his attention was drawn back to the staircase. Miss Allsunday was making her way down, alone. The Shishibukai got up quickly, clearly angry at the sight of his partner.

"Where is she?!"

"Miss Wednesday was not anywhere in Rainbase," she explained. "I even fought off Pell of the Royal Guard, who was sent to find her. If he had no idea where she was, then it is clear that she is elsewhere."

"WHAT?!" Crocodile roared. He started to move towards the cage in a fit of rage. "WHERE IS THE PRINCESS, STRAW HAT?!"

"Shishishi, I told you! I'm not telling!" he laughed as he stuck his tongue out at him.

"So, you do know the princess," Smoker mentioned. "The kid wasn't lying..."

"I want answers!" Crocodile demanded. "What did Vivi tell you? How much did you three reveal? How did these pirates know to be in Rainbase to look for you? How did you know to be here, Smoker? Where is the princess?!"

"Hmm," Smoker smiled. "You heard the dumbass. I guess we aren't telling."

Crocodile's eyes were bulging as he stared venomously at his captives. Finally, his eyes fell on Steven's wrist and the small watch like bracelet he had on it. "Tiger Millionaire...is that...?!"

Steven flashed a smile and flipped up the ornament that revealed the Black Den Den Mushi. "Gotcha!"

The color once again drained from Crocodile's face as he scanned the arms of the other pirates. "You...you have been eavesdropping the whole time! Vivi..."

"Is on her way back to her father with the proof that he needs to show the rebels who the real mastermind behind all of this is!" Usopp said confidently. "It's over, Crocodile! You were no match for the genius of Captain Usopp!"

"Dude!" Luffy hit him again. "I said 'not telling!'"

"What?! He already figured it out!"

"So, this is why you Marines are here as well," Crocodile whispered. "You were eavesdropping on everything...son of a bitch! Miss Allsunday, get me Mr. 2! He needs to intercept the princess now!"

"But Crocodile...if he is on schedule then he is presently meeting with the leader of the rebels..." Miss Allsunday tried to explain.

"SHIT!" Crocodile roared. "Fine! I'll find her myself! You all have outlived your usefulness to me! I was hoping to enjoy watching your deaths, but you don't even deserve that right!"

He went over to his chair and was about to press a button when Miss Allsunday's jacket started to ring. Everyone looked surprised as she rummaged through her pocket and pulled out a tiny Den Den Mushi. "Hello? Is this a member of the Millions?"

"Is this thing working? I'm not used to these Baby Den Den Mushis," the voice at the other end asked them.

"We can understand you over here," Miss Allsunday replied.

Crocodile grabbed the little thing and started to yell into it. "Report! Have you spotted Princess Vivi?!"

There was a pause. "Oh. I remember that voice from Little Garden. If it isn't Crocodile: the big bad Shishibukai and Mr. 0."

"WHAT?!" Crocodile was truly enraged now. "Who the hell is this?!"

"We've never met or spoke, but I believe you have my shitty partner there. They call me Obi-Wan Kenobi," the snail answered.

"Obi...Wan...the partner of Tiger Millionaire..." Crocodile recalled the earlier conversation on the Den Den Mushi with Miss Goldenweek and Steven: *"My partner...uh...Obi-Wan Kenobi...and I were saved by Mr. 5 and we owed him a favor, no questions asked."*

"Ah, I see my reputation precedes me."

Inside the cage, Luffy and the others, including the now-awake Zoro, were listening to this intently. The captain started to call out his real name before having his mouth covered by Petrea and Usopp.

"Don't say his name!" Usopp whispered. "He doesn't know about him yet!"

"That's right! He and Chopper are still out there!" Petrea said excitedly. "I'd almost forgotten that they were going to lay low in the area!"

As for Steven, he grabbed the bars and started to yell out with all of his might. "Help me, Obi-Wan Kenobi! You're my only hope!"



"Ah," Sanji spoke from the Den Den Mushi. "It sounds like you have my dumbass partner with you. Sorry, I've been busy draining your casino dry. You've got a lot of good games here shithead. I figured if I'm going to help bring you down, I might as well start where it hurts."

"Did you now?!" Crocodile was starting to lose his composure. "Why don't you come to me so we can talk about it like gentlemen?"

"Now that would be cheating, and we all know how cheating is viewed in a casino," he laughed. "I...what the...you!"

Everyone was as silent as they could be. Something was happening on the other end of the Den Den Mushi to Sanji. The Straw Hats looked beyond worried as Crocodile kept his face impassive as to not get his hopes up.

"Well, that ought to hold you, Straw Hat pirate bastard," a familiar voice replied from the other end. "Am I correct in assuming that I am speaking with Mr. 0?"

"You are, indeed," Crocodile started to grin uncontrollably. "Tell me what happened! Where are you? Who is this?"

The Straw Hats collectively held their breaths in anticipation, save Genevieve, who frowned and listened closely. "That voice...it couldn't be..."

"Boss, I'm surprised you don't recognize me. Has it been that long that you forgot the voice of your smartest Officer Agent?"

"Mr. 3," Miss Allsunday whispered.

"WHAT?!" Luffy yelled. "THAT WAX GUY?!"

"Why is he here?!" Petrea asked. "How is he here?!"

"We only robbed his ship," Genevieve pointed out. "He could have escaped anytime he wanted."

"How are you so calm right now?!" Petrea demanded to know. "Shouldn't you be the one who is the most worked up?!"

"Speak for yourself! I'm the one who shot him!" Damian panicked.

"Trust me, I'm terrified right now," Genevieve folded her arms.

"YOU DON'T LOOK IT!"

"Is that the sound of my darling partner and the 'Mr. 5 Pair' I hear?" Mr. 3 asked. "Then I am right in assuming you have all the Straw Hat pirates locked up, including the boy and excluding this one here?"

"You are, Mr. 3," Crocodile grinned. "You have done well. I will come up to you and..."

"Do you play me for a fool?" Mr. 3 cut him off. "I failed in my mission and allowed the defection of three Officer Agents. I know the price for failure, 'Crocodile.'"

As Crocodile stood there in shock, Mr. 3 continued. "Yes, I know who you are. How else would I know where to look? Well...besides some of my new partners. You see, they are on a mission to reclaim one of their own...someone who doesn't belong...and I was more than happy to assist them as it meant I could get the one-up on you before you sought me out first."

"Partners?' What are you talking about?" Crocodile asked

"Oh, trust me; you'll know when you see them."

The ceiling then started to shake, as if something large was pounding on it. Finally, a large chunk of it came crashing down in the hidden room, nearly crushing Crocodile, who was now furious beyond belief.

"He's motioning down there! Come on!" a female voice cried from the casino floor. Steven's ears twitched as he tried to figure out where he had heard that voice before.

At once, a giant pink lion jumped down to the floor below carrying a small girl and a middle aged man. Behind them, three feminine figures jumped down and adopted a battle stance around Crocodile and Miss Allsunday. Each of them created a weapon seemingly from

out of nowhere when the tallest one, who wore sunglasses and had an afro, cracked her knuckles menacingly.

"I'm going to tell you this once: Give. Us. Steven!"

# The Gauntlets In the Sand

The Straw Hats witnessed the sight of a bunch of people they didn't know arriving out of nowhere with awe. Whoever they were, they knew how to make an entrance. However, it didn't take long for them to start putting the pieces together, despite how incredible a concept it might be.

"Is...is that a pink lion?" Tashigi asked incredulously.

"It couldn't be..." Usopp whispered. "That one looks just like Steven's snowman..."

"Steven? Is that...?" Nami asked the boy, but found that he was focused beyond all belief at the appearance of these people.

Steven rubbed his eyes in shock.

Somehow, somehow, his family was standing mere feet in front of him. But that was physically impossible...wasn't it? And yet, there they were right there.

He felt like crying...'Aw, heck with it!' he thought to himself.

"Dad! Connie! Lion! Amethyst! Pearl! Garnet!" Steven started to weep as he stretched his hand out from the bars.

"Steven!" they all shouted at once.

"You're okay!" Connie cried out with joy, running over to the cage right past Crocodile.

"What the hell is this?" he asked, partially amused but incredibly annoyed. "Mr. 3's groupies?"

"You dare...you dare to lock Steven in a cage!" Garnet shouted in anger. She went to grab his collar, but it dissolved in her hand.

"Steven...you mean Tiger Millionaire? For someone I have never heard of, why does it seem that everyone of importance in this

country seem to have a connection to you?" Crocodile ignored the Gems and started moving toward the table.

Amethyst started to laugh. "'Tiger Millionaire?' Seriously? That's your alias here? That's awesome!"

"Is she purple? Why is she purple?" Tashigi asked Smoker.

"Just shut up and listen! Clearly we are out of our element," he growled to her.

"You must be Connie," Genevieve pointed to the girl from inside the cage as Crocodile was talking.

"You know me?" she asked, confused and impressed. "How...?"

"Steven talks about you...a lot. I'm Genevieve," she waved.

"Steven's friend, apparently."

"Apparently," the girl smiled just looking at Steven, who was now holding her hand tighter than ever.

"Connie, I was so worried that I'd never see you again!" he cried.

"I'm so happy right now...even though I'm trapped in an unbreakable cage!"

Greg, on the other hand, was keeping his distance with Lion, trying to survey the odd place that his son was being held captive. Though he wanted to go over to his son as well, he felt that it was more important for him to have his reunion with Connie first.

"HEY!" Luffy called as the two were crying. "ARE YOU THREE THE CRYSTAL GEMS?"

Pearl pointed her weapon at the cage. "Quiet, pirate scum! We are here to take Steven back home where it is safe!"

"Uh...Pearl," Amethyst whispered and pointed to the weeping Steven. "I think they are Steven's friends."

"I don't care! Does this look like an appropriate, safe place for a boy Steven's age...stop moving!" Pearl pointed her staff at Crocodile,

who had sat down once more. "That idiot Mr. 3 told us all about you and your reputation! Don't play any tricks with us!"

"Did he now?" Crocodile smirked. "Well, I know nothing of you or why you found the need to invade my property."

"They are the Crystal Gems!" Luffy called out.

"They always save the day!" Nami added.

"And if you think they can't," Petrea chimed in, but kept her distance from the bars.

"They'll always find a way," Damian followed suit.

"That's why the people of our world believe in," Connie stood proudly with her best friend's new friends.

"Garnet!" Genevieve pointed to the Gem in question.

"Amethyst?" Usopp did the same. "That's her right?"

"And Pearl," Zoro lazily pointed his sword to the final Gem, who blushed.

They all turned to Steven, who jumped up in the air and struck a pose. "AND STEVEN!"

Amethyst elbowed Pearl in the ribs. "See! They know the song! They HAVE to be Steven's friends! Even Connie is getting along with them!"

Miss Allsunday started to chuckle and clap. "That was very cute. Did you write it yourself, Steven?"

He nodded. "I did! Oh, and that's Connie and over there is Lion and my dad!"

"It's a pleasure," she bowed.

"This is not the time for pleasantries, Nico Robin!" Crocodile growled. "Do you want me to kill you too?"

"Don't be a stick in the mud," Miss Allsunday sighed. "And didn't you promise me that you would never use my real name ever again?"

"You must forgive me," he sighed. "A lot has happened today. So, 'Crystal Gems,' what can I do to get you to leave me alone? I'm a very busy man and I have a schedule to keep. It takes a lot of work to topple a country after all."

"Release the boy and his friends and we may let you walk out of here," Garnet said menacingly. "From what I gather, you are the lowest kind of person imaginable. However, since this isn't our world, you are not our problem."

"Ah, and there's the rub," Crocodile lit another cigar. "You see, your friend has been a source of trouble for me since he got involved with my people. I'm afraid that I can't do that. But don't worry, I can leave you with a parting gift."

He went to press a button on his chair, but he was beat there by Amethyst's whip. The weapon destroyed the arm rest before he could press it. "Not happening, bro."

"Very well," he sighed. "It appears that you have left me no choice. Do remember that, when you are crying out in pain, I did give you a chance to run."

Crocodile turned to Miss Allsunday and growled. "Still...before we begin, I do have my image to uphold. Evacuate the casino, Miss Allsunday. We don't want to give our gamblers a reason to panic beyond rebel activity."

"Very well," she replied. She started to leave but was blocked by Pearl. Miss Allsunday put her hands on her hips and sighed. "I really don't want to do this, so please let me pass."

"You helped put my Steven in a cage! Do you think I'm going to...?"

"Actually, she helped dry me off when I drowned!" Steven called from the cage. "Don't hurt her! I don't think she's all bad!"

"I hate to burst your bubble of optimism, kid, but she has one of the highest bounties in all of the world," Smoker interjected, not taking

his eyes off of the woman or her boss, who had stopped to see his partner leave. "It's over 70,000,000 berries. She's one of the most dangerous women on the face of the planet."

"See, Steven! She is a criminal!" Pearl stood her ground. "More importantly, she's a criminal who tried to hurt you!"

"But she didn't! Besides, I'm technically a criminal too here!" Steven pleaded. He looked to Smoker and frowned. "Does Luffy have a bounty?"

"He does."

"Then having a bounty doesn't mean anything to me!" Steven declared. "Let her go help the people!"

"He's right," Crocodile taunted, getting up and moving toward Garnet. "I can't predict the amount of casualties that might take place if something were to happen down here. Make your choice 'Crystal Gem.'"

Pearl frowned and stepped aside, allowing the woman to head to the stairs. As she walked away, the Gem's eyes narrowed. "This isn't over."

With the woman named Nico Robin gone from the room, all eyes were on the Gems and Crocodile. The man was seemingly waiting for the Gems to make the first strike. He stared at them, sizing them up and noting their weapons: Pearl's spear, Amethyst's whip, and Garnet's gauntlets. As this was happening, Lion and Greg moved to where Connie was by the cage to stay out of the way.

Finally, it was Pearl who made the first strike. She twirled around and slashed her staff at Crocodile in a downwards motion, but it passed right through him, not doing anything but making him grin. The man then grabbed her arm and crushed it, causing her to scream.

He stared at her arm as Amethyst started to whip him as if he were expecting something to happen. Disregarding the shorter Gem's attack all together, he threw Pearl into her and narrowed his eyes.



"What ARE you?! You have no blood or water in your body whatsoever!"

Before he had time to ponder the question even more, Garnet came charging after him and started to punch him repeatedly with her gauntlets. Crocodile allowed her to do so for a moment before taking his one good hand and summoning what appeared to be sand and throwing it at the Gem. The sand formed together to make a giant blade and hit her in the chest, sending her flying into the wall.

"Garnet!" Pearl got herself up and created another staff from her forehead gemstone. This time, she pointed it at Crocodile and shot out an arrow tipped burst of light straight at him. Crocodile smiled for a moment and created a hole in his body large enough for the beam to pass through. "How is he doing that?!"

"He ate a Devil Fruit!" Smoker called out. "He has the ability to turn his entire body into sand!"

"No interference from the spectators, Smoker," Crocodile frowned. "That's cheating!"

He started back over to the Gems and created a miniature cyclone of sand in his palm, throwing it right at them. The storm raged on in the small space, whipping sand at the warriors and causing their vision to become clouded. Pearl shut her eyes and tried to dance out of the storm, but found that the elements were overcoming her.

However, she was not blind enough not to notice the shimmering of gold in the storm. Knowing that Crocodile was about to stab her, she shut her eyes and opened up her mind. She took her staff and connected with the hook. Getting the staff in the curve of the hook, she twirled him around and smashed him into the ground, where he dissolved into more sand particles.

"This is bad," Pearl whispered. "He has no tangible form to strike and his body is malleable enough to deflect our projectile weapons..."

"Do you think we should fuse?" Amethyst asked as Crocodile regained his shape, ending the storm with him.

"We would be wide open if we tried to dance down here...besides, I think we need a different approach..."

\*AGITR\*

As the Gems dueled with Crocodile, the Straw Hats in the cage were watching the fighting intently. Not only was this a good way to get a preview of Crocodile's fighting style, but it was their first chance to see how Gems beside Steve acted and fought.

Needless to say, they were pleased.

"Steven, your family is strong!" Luffy said in awe.

"But not strong enough," Nami pointed out. "If Crocodile is made of sand, physical attacks won't do anything. Pearl's energy attack might be their only chance if Crocodile doesn't see it coming."

"Give it time, guys," Steven smiled. "You haven't seen everything that the Gems can do."

He turned his attention to his father, who had just moved closer to him. He gave him as close of a hug as he could and started to pet Lion. "I can't believe that you guys are here. I mean, I really can't believe it! How did you manage to travel to this dimension?"

"Steven, it is a long, drawn out, complicated story that I would love to tell you when a giant death battle between the Gems and a monster pirate isn't happening mere inches from us," Greg sighed. "The important thing is that I found you! I've been worried sick for days! You can't do that to a man my age! You'll make me go bald!"

"Daaaaad!" Steven blushed. "Oh, these are all of my friends! Luffy is our captain, Nami is the navigator, Usopp is the liar..."

The teenager in question hit him on the back of his head. "You are just as bad as Luffy! I'm the sniper!"

"Zoro is the swordsman, Petrea is the chocolatier, Damian is the bomb guy, and Genevieve there is the painter!"

"Nice to meetcha!" Greg smiled. "Um, thanks for taking care of my

son."

"Kyahahaha!" Petrea laughed, ruffling Steven's hair much to his embarrassment. "You've raised a good kid here."

"Aw, shucks...hold on, was that your laugh?" Greg pondered as he looked to the other two people on the cage. "Wait...what about the scary one and the girl with glasses over there?"

"Oh, that's Tashigi and Captain Smoker! They are trying to put us in jail, but they are nice!"

Greg looked around and scratched his head. "Well, I think they succeeded."

"So..." Connie asked, who was getting the rundown of everything by Genevieve. "You weren't kidnapped by pirates like Mr. 3 told us, but have actually become one?!"

"Mr. 3 is kind of a jerk," Steven pointed out.

"He tried to kill us," Genevieve added. "Wait, how did you meet up with him?"

"We landed on some island and he knew where Steven was going, but enough of that! Steven, I'm so jealous! You are an actual pirate! That's so cool!"

"No, it's not!" Tashigi protested.

"Oh, do you want to be a part of my crew too?" Luffy asked nonchalantly.

"Would I?!"

"Gah! I don't think your mother would want me to let you become a pirate!" Greg argued. "No offense!"

"Does this really seem like the appropriate time or place to be doing this?!" Usopp yelled. "There is literally a fight to the death happening around us and we are trapped behind bars!"

Zoro, who had been watching the fight intently, suddenly sat up and drew his swords. "Stay focused, everyone! Glass shards incoming!"

Steven nodded and focused his energy into his gem. A pink bubble surrounded both the cage and a little bit outside of it, enough to protect everyone from a hail of glass being shot around at them. The shards bounced right off of the bubble and away from them.

"Good work, kid, but we can't keep on relying on your shield to save us," Zoro folded his arms. "We are sitting ducks in this cage."

"Do you want me to try to cut the bars?" Connie suggested.

"What?!" the Straw Hats asked at once.

"You brought mom's sword?!" Steven asked excitedly.

"Kid, these bars are made from sea stone. It is some of the most unbreakable material on the entire Grand Line. You won't be able to make a dent in it at all," Smoker told her.

Connie merely put down her backpack and pulled out her giant sword, much to everyone's surprise. Zoro and Tashigi were especially intrigued at the appearance of a sword that clearly did not fit in a backpack that small.

"So cool!" Usopp, Damian, and Luffy said at once.

"Step aside! I'll handle this!" Connie yelled, hitting the bars with all of her might. To her disappointment, not a single blow she made did the damage she was expecting. "I...wow, this IS strong!"

"I warned you."

"Hey Mr. Universe, why don't you try?" Connie suggested.

"Dad?!" Steven asked. "What can dad do?!"

"Um...Steven, what I'm about to show you is going to make you really disappointed..." Greg gave a weak smile. "Please don't hate me too much."

"You're my dad," Steven was confused. "Why would I hate you?"

"Jealousy," Greg frowned as he reached into his pocket and pulled out a silver rod. Pressing a button, a blade of blue light appeared, causing everyone to jump back in shock.

"What the hell is that?!" Zoro asked. "A laser sword?!"

"I WANT ONE!" Luffy yelled.

The half-Gem's jaw hit the floor as he stared at his father, who scratched his head in embarrassment. "IS THAT A LIGHTSABER?!"

"Yeah..."

"YOU HAVE A LIGHTSABER?!" Steven's eyes glowed with stars in his irises.

"Yeah..."

"WHERE DID YOU GET A LIGHTSABER?!" Steven managed to get out.

"...we kinda fought General Greivous at one point and I got one. It was right before we went to the Batcave and met Batman..." Greg sighed, knowing that he might have just broken his son's heart.

The boy dropped to his knees and started to clap excitedly. "You met Batman?! You have a *LIGHTSABER*?! I have the coolest dad ever!"

"Darn tooting, skippy!" Greg made a goofy pose. "Now let's blow this thing and go home!"

He swiped the blade into all of the bars, managing to cut through them like warm butter. While everyone in the cage was amazed, it was Smoker who was the most blown away.

"That's impossible..." Smoker actually dropped his cigar on the ground.

"Search your feelings, you know it to be true!" Steven responded.

"Come on! Let's go fillet a codfish!"

"Oh yeah! I'm gonna kick his ass!" Luffy cried in anticipation as Greg finished making a door.

"Language!" Steven, Connie, and Greg all said at the same time.

\*AGITR\*

Garnet rubbed her head as she got up off of the ground. The man had somehow managed to send a sand dagger right into her chest. She considered herself lucky that it wasn't just a bit more powerful or else she would have split apart into Ruby and Sapphire, or worse: their gemstones.

As she watched Pearl and Amethyst fight a literal sandstorm, Garnet started to think about potential strategies against this man. Punching clearly wasn't cutting it, as they all just went straight through him. Projectile energy blasts could only work if he was caught off-guard, but discounting the moment where he grabbed Pearl's arm, Crocodile was clearly in control of this fight.

However, a memory nagged her. It was one from almost a year ago, when the Gems played volleyball with the Pizza family. An image of a volleyball striking the ground at intense speeds and forming glass filled her mind. Suddenly, she knew exactly how to beat Crocodile.

"...I think we need a different approach," Pearl was saying as Garnet moved closer.

"My thoughts exactly," Garnet frowned. "Besides, this is too small of an area for a proper fusion. Let me take care of this."

"But Garnet," Amethyst asked. "We can't even touch this guy! You even just got knocked back like you were nothing!"

"Any pain I suffer to get Steven back is worth it to me," she said with finality. "Stay back; I'm going to end this."

She moved towards Crocodile, who cocked his head curiously. "Didn't I knock you down already, you cocky bitch?"

"You knock me down, I'll just get back up again," she snarled. Her gauntlets grew in size once more, but this time they started to sizzle with electricity.

"What's this?" Crocodile asked. "Going to try agai..." He was cut off by Garnet's gauntlet smashing him in his face. With the electrical current charging through him, Crocodile found himself actually feeling pain.

The man stumbled to the floor and coughed out a small bit of blood. He stared at the red liquid with sheer hatred. "This changes things," he growled. **"Desert Spada!"**

Generating another blade of sand, he hurled it toward Garnet, who merely started punching her way through into with all of her might. As she kept moving forward, Crocodile tried to increase the intensity of the blasts. Unfortunately, the sand was being turned into glass as shards flew around the room, including into the tank of the banana gators.

The beasts, riled up from the disturbance of projectile weapons, started to rise out of the water and onto the surface of the Baroque Works hidden room. As Garnet was presently busy with Crocodile, it fell to Amethyst and Pearl to combat two full grown banana gators.

Garnet was worried that some of the shards would strike Steven or his odd friends, but she made out the distinctive pink hue of Steven's shield. 'He's gotten better control of his abilities,' she noted to herself with pride. 'That's my Steven.'

With a final punch, she made it through the bladed sand and found a worried Crocodile just waiting for her. She started to pummel his face with everything she could, taking out the rage and frustration of Steven's disappearance and the long journey they took to get there. Garnet threw a powerful uppercut on Crocodile's jaw, sending him to the top of the staircase.

"Had enough?" Garnet panted before looking over at the cage. Greg had whipped out his space sword and started to cut the bars open. Her three eyes widened with shock. If that cage was opened, Steven would be in the line of fire. The Gem had picked up that the cage

was somehow holding back Crocodile's power, but despite how badly she wanted Steven free, she knew Crocodile had to be defeated first.

Unfortunately, the villain noticed this and started to laugh. "Ah, this works out in my favor. You have a choice 'Crystal Gem:' chase after me through a crowd of innocents or stop my banana gators from eating your pirate friends!"

Garnet started to rush towards Crocodile, disregarding the others and knowing the priority. She trusted her teammates to handle the situation without an issue. However, the room started to shake as she began to rush Crocodile once more. The Shishibukai continued his laugh. "And as an added bonus, this room is set to explode in less than two minutes. What use have I for a Baroque Works meeting room when, in a few hours, this entire country will be mine? Your fighting has been drawing out the timer. Did I forget to mention that?!"

With that, he faded away into a sand cloud, leaving the Straw Hats and Marines alone with the Gems. Garnet tried to punch the cloud as it disappeared, failing to do anything. "Darn it!" she cursed. "I had him! I was too cocky!"

"Now's not the time to blame yourself, Garnet," Pearl called to her and she started to hit the banana gator in the chest with her staff. "The important thing is that we have Steven!"

Garnet nodded and took the opportunity to run over to the sea stone cage where her favorite half-Gem was currently running out from. Tears streaming down his face, he stretched out his arms and went to hug her. "GARNET!"

"Steven!" she smiled. "Nothing has made me happier than seeing you right now in this moment."

"You were so cool!" Luffy ran over to her. "How did you do that thing with your fists?!"

"Magic," she replied.



"AWESOME!"

"Not to point out the obvious, but we need to get out of here...now!" Smoker warned everyone. He pointed to the walls that were starting to leak water. "We are in the middle of a lake. When this thing blows, we are screwed."

"So?" Greg asked. "We'll just swim up to the surface! A lake isn't that bad to..."

"Greg, was it?" Petrea asked. "You couldn't possibly know this, but if you've eaten a Devil Fruit, like half of us here, then we can't swim. At all."

"We sink like anchors," Damian added.

The elder Universe observed the state of the room. The staircase that Crocodile had escaped from had already started to break apart. The walls were beginning to crumble as water filled the small space. Two giant animals were presently being beaten by Pearl and Amethyst, rather easily Greg noted. Finally, Steven and Connie (as well as another young girl) were all about to be trapped underwater with a bunch of criminals, nice as they may be, and and Marines.

"So basically we are in a no-win situation?" Greg asked.

"Yup!" Steven smiled. "Just the way we like it!"

"I like these odds!" Luffy agreed, disregarding his own dwindling strength.

"Spoken like a true Crystal Gem," Garnet smiled. "Let's get out of here!"

# The Lingering Doubts

The room was now filling up with water rapidly. Though the Gems barely acknowledged the liquid, the Devil Fruit users were already starting to feel the effects on their bodies. Regardless, the morale was high despite the state of their situation.

"Well I think those alligator creatures are down for the count," Pearl said as she and Amethyst made their way back to the others, who were trying to think of the best possible way to escape the room. "They were just so...unpleasant."

"Pearl!" Steven ran over to hug her. The Gem's eyes opened wide as he embraced her. Tears started to flow as the two took the moment to enjoy their reunion.

After a moment, and with much effort on Steven's part, he eventually pried Pearl off and went to greet Amethyst as well.

"I'm so happy for Steven!" Damian started to cry himself. "It's so emotional!"

"I know!" Luffy had joined him. "He finally got reunited with his family!"

"Can we stop the crying fest and focus you idiot?!" Smoker grabbed Luffy by the shirt, which caused Zoro to draw his swords at him.

"Woah! Stand down, Zoro!" Luffy ordered. "Smokey's right! We need to get out of here so I can finish what Garnet started and kick Crocodile's a..." He looked to the Gems and Steven before sighing. "Butt...man, it just doesn't sound as cool that way..."

"Oh! I know!" Steven jumped up and down a bit. "Why don't I bubble everyone again and...?"

"Out of the question!" Petrea put her foot down. "You already drowned once doing that for us! You are not doing that again!"

"STEVEN DROWNED?!" Pearl panicked.

"Dude, he said that already!" Amethyst reminded her.

"I don't care!" Pearl started to pace instinctively. "We did not just traverse the Multiverse to put Steven in any more life threatening situations! It's bad enough that he became a pirate!"

The young half-Gem started to pout. "Hey! Take that back, Pearl! You don't know the first thing about these guys! They are good people and saved me when I ended up here!" Steven walked over and took his place with the Straw Hats, standing his ground.

"Besides, being a Crystal Gem is about protecting people, not trying to keep me in a bubble! I've been a big help since I got here and I want to keep helping as much as I can! This is what my mom would do and you know it!"

"Steven..." Pearl could barely respond back to his emotional call to reason before the walls started to collapse even more.

"There's no time for a debate on ethics!" Garnet interjected. "Steven, I have the utmost faith in you! Make your bubble around everyone immediately!"

"But..." Petrea started to cut in before Garnet walked over and put her hand on her shoulder.

"Steven's friend, don't worry. Gems don't need to breath. Steven won't be pushing you out of the water; we will."

"Oy, Steven!" Luffy called. "Don't forget Smokey and Tashigi!"

"What?!" Smoker growled.

Steven blinked and paused for a second. "...why would I?"

"Because I know Nami said not to be nice to Marines, but they tried to help us out! We can't let them die!"

"Of course not!" Steven nodded. "Everybody get really close to me...you too Lion!"

Steven used all of his might and focus to keep his final bubble solid. Unfortunately, some water did manage to stay inside of it, but it did

not bother Steven in the slightest. He was on cloud nine. His friends were all around him, his family was safe, and he knew Vivi had the proof she needed to bring Crocodile down. Heck, if she had the Black Den Den Mushi flipped up on her end, she could have listened in to that entire situation, but Steven assumed that she was too busy trying to get to her father.

The only two lingering problems were Crocodile, which was obvious, and the nagging feeling in his stomach that the Gems were going to be far more protective of him in the future. He had worked hard to gain the trust of the Straw Hats and was seen as an equal to them. Would Pearl ever see Steven as an equal to her?

Or would she just see him as the last remnant of Rose Quartz that needed to be preserved?

"Look! I think we are almost there! You're doing it, Steven!" Connie brought him back to reality. It was true; they about to surface outside of the Rain Dinners casino.

With a large push, Garnet threw Steven's bubble out of the water, which dissipated when it hit the ground, leaving the Straw Hats, Marines, and the dimensional travelers stuck in the middle of a street wide panic.

"Wha...what's happening?" Steven asked, very concerned about the people running frightened around him.

"Crocodile had Nico Robin evacuate the casino," Smoker frowned. "It was the perfect way for him to get away unnoticed."

"Hey," Steven smiled. "You might say he caused a smokescreen! Eh? Eh?"

The others looked at him and sighed, save Luffy who started to crack up. "Shishishi! Get it Smokey? 'Smokescreen?'"

The Marine captain was not having any of that and he grabbed the jute weapon that was strapped to his back and pointed it at Luffy. The tension, which was already high, thickened as everyone watched the man to see what he was doing.

"Straw Hat, why did you specify to make sure the kid took us both when you knew I'd arrest you for piracy?"

The pirate shrugged. "I like you, Smokey! I don't want to see you die!"

"If you like me so much, would you allow me to follow through my duties as a Marine and arrest you and your crew?"

"Nope!" Luffy smiled. "I still have things to do! Do you want to fight about it?"

The Marine looked conflicted. He stared from Luffy to Steven and then to his partner. She had a neutral expression on her face, but he knew the right thing to do in order to bring about Justice: "Get out of here," he ordered.

"What?!" Nami asked incredulously. "What do you mean?!"

"I mean get out of here! This is the one time I will ever let you leave! The next time I find you, I will arrest you for piracy and for child endangerment!" he yelled as he nodded over to Steven. "But rest assured, Crocodile will be mine!"

"Fat chance, Smokey!" Luffy laughed. "Come on guys! We still need to find Sanji and Chopper!"

"What? Who?" Greg asked, confused as they started to run away from a bewildered Tashigi and content Smoker. "I think I need the Cliffnotes version of what is going on!"

A few nearby Marines pointed at the fleeing pirates and raised their rifles to stop them, but Smoker forced them to stand down. Though they were confused, the only one who dared to question him was Tashigi.

"Captain, what was that for?! You let them go..."

"I did what needed to be done," Smoker motioned for her to follow him to his custom vehicle that he had parked near the casino's entrance. "Tashigi, did you comprehend what we just witnessed?"

"Barely...Crocodile wanted to take over the country and..." Tashigi started before she was cut off.

"We both knew about that from your little chat with that bubble boy," Smoker rubbed his temples. "We might have just witnessed the first dimensional travelers and lived to tell the tale."

Tashigi stopped and regarded her superior. "Do you think those Crystal Gems are dangerous?"

"The one with the glasses has the capacity to take down Crocodile with a fury of punches, the other two held their own against two full grown banana gators and didn't break a sweat, and I know for a fact I heard them use the word 'fusion!'" the Marine tried to explain as he mounted his bike. "This is getting out of hand and the brass need to know about it. I'm putting you in charge of apprehending Crocodile."

"What? Me?!" Tashigi gasped. "What do I even do? Where do I go?"

"Follow your sense of Justice," Smoker put on his sunglasses. "And keep your damn Black Den Den Mushi open! There is no telling what kind of information we might get from the kid. If this isn't a Marine victory, the world is going to be thrown in chaos..."

She thought about the implications of pirates and dimensional aliens taking the credit for stopping a Shishibukai and reclaiming a country run by the noble Nefeltari family. With no doubt left in her mind, she saluted Smoker, who nodded as he rode off.

"Men!" she ordered to her nearby Marines. "We are going to Alubarna!"

\*AGITR\*

The crew did not have to go far before discovering Sanji among the crowd of people, as he immediately ran over to Nami and Petrea and started fawning over them.

"Nami-san! Petrea-chan! My darlings! I missed you so! I would have rushed to get you, but that shitty wax guy locked up my legs with his powers! Then he robbed all of the money I won for you and ran off! I managed to kick that shit off, but I got lost in this crowd chasing after

him! Are you safe?! Did that shithead hurt you?!"

"Calm down, Sanji!" Nami whacked him in the head. "We have to focus! Crocodile escaped and is after Vivi and her father!"

"He dies!" Sanji declared to the heavens dramatically. Then he looked at the crowd and frowned. "Am I seeing things or did we get more people?"

"Who the heck is that?" Greg whispered to Damian. "I'm still trying to figure these things out."

"He's an asshole," Damian picked his nose in indifference.

Greg merely nodded and shifted slightly away from the man and poked Usopp on the shoulder. "Who the heck is that?"

"Our perverted cook," Usopp sighed. "It sounds worse than it is."

"...these are the kind of people my son has been hanging out with?!" Greg whispered to himself. "I have no idea how to take this right now!"

"My advice?" Genevieve suggested. "Just go with it. That's what I've been doing and it's been doing wonders."

Steven's father just regarded the cynical teenage girl and searched for an appropriate response. Unfortunately, he found none.

"Sanji!" Steven ran up to him. "You were doing great as Obi-Wan! I can't believe you remembered to do that!"

"I do what I can, kid," he ruffled his hair. "So, who are...?" Sanji stopped as his eyes set sight on the three Crystal Gems. His jaw dropped and he immediately grabbed Pearl's arm, who tried to back away.

"What is this...vulgar man doing?" Pearl asked, disgusted at Sanji's display.

"Speak for yourself," Amethyst laughed. "This is hysterical!"

"'Vulgar?' You wound me, my dear. Allow me to introduce myself: I am Sanji, the greatest chef and lover on the Grand Line. May I just say that you are perfection personified!" He went to kiss her hand, which caused Pearl to slap him away into a nearby water fountain.

"The nerve of some people!" Pearl wiped her hands in irritation. "This dimension is full of nothing but low life, rude, obnoxious..."

"Now stop that, Pearl!" Steven protested. "Yes, Sanji is weird, but he's still my friend! All of the Straw Hats are my friends and have accepted me like a family! You can't talk about them like that!"

"Steven, the man is a pirate..."

"Pirates are awesome," Garnet chimed in.

"What?!" Steven and Pearl said at once, but with different inflections.

"Pirates. Are. Awesome," she repeated. "Enough said."

"You can't be serious!" Pearl argued. "They steal things, they drink liquor, they get in mindless fights, and they set a terrible example for Steven!"

"Any friend of Steven's is a friend of mine," Garnet folded her arms. "If he says they are good people, I believe him."

Pearl just stood there in shock as Garnet helped Sanji up and dusted his shoulders off. "Thank you for trying to save our Steven, pirate man. You have our thanks."

He went to open his mouth, but she put her finger there to stop him. "Just don't."

As they were talking, the other Straw Hats were whispering to each other and looking at Steven with a serious look on their faces. Connie noticed it immediately and went to question it, but was stopped by Genevieve.

"You'll find out soon enough," she said, very distant. Connie stared at the girl and thought she saw her eyes redden.



"Was...was she just stopping herself from crying?"

\*AGITR\*

The pirates forced their way through the crowds and made it to the edge of Rainbase. All that was left to do was figure out the best way to Alubarna.

"We can't go anywhere without Chopper!" Luffy demanded. "Sanji, where did he go?"

"He told me that he and Eyelashes had something to do," Sanji shrugged. He went to light another cigarette but had it extinguished by Garnet.

"Who is Eyelashes?" Genevieve asked.

"A camel we befriended in the desert," Nami explained. "Long story."

"Ah."

"Still, we need to make some distance of we are to get to Alubarna," the navigator sighed. "Crocodile could be anywhere and we would need to make serious speeds to catch up to him."

"I can help with that!" a voice called from the distance.

Moving closer and closer to the group was an incredibly large crab-like creature. It had a perpetual smile and a claw which was larger than the other. On top of it rode a most welcoming sight: Chopper and the aforementioned Eyelashes.

"It's Chopper!" Steven, Luffy, Damian and Usopp cried at once.

"What's a 'Chopper?'" Connie asked the crew.

"A talking doctor reindeer," Petrea whispered. "He's really cute."

"Your doctor...is a talking reindeer?" she asked, amazed. "That is so cool!"

"What about the crab?" Amethyst asked. "It looks delicious."

"Agreed," Sanji and Zoro nodded.

"DON'T!" Chopper screamed. "Scissors is an old friend of Eyelashes! He's willing to take us as far as he can get to Alubarna so we can get to Vivi!"

"Alright!" Luffy jumped for joy. "Come on everyone, let's get going!"

"Yay! We are going to go find Vivi!" Steven went to join in, but was stopped by Pearl and Garnet.

"We?" Pearl asked, incredulous at the thought. "Steven, there is no 'we!' We are going back to Beach City immediately! Who knows what kind of terror Peridot might be causing?"

"Pearl's right," Garnet nodded. "We have a responsibility to our world. This isn't our fight, Steven..."

"Yes, it is!" Steven yelled. "It became my fight the second that I landed on their ship! It became my fight the second Genevieve risked her life to lie for me. It became my fight the second Luffy and I fused!"

The two Gems have each other looks of disbelief. "You...you fused with that pirate?!" Pearl nearly fainted.

Garnet eyed up the Straw Hat captain and chuckled. "Incredible."

Steven nodded. "We both really cared about our friends and it was the only thing we could do to save them!"

"Steven," Nami called to him. He turned to regard her and saw that she was frowning. "Your family is right. You did everything you could for us. We can handle it from here."

"What?!" Steven asked shocked. "What do you mean?!"

"It's true," Usopp said in a hollow voice. "You'd just get in the way at this point. We can't risk your safety any longer."

The young boy looked at each of the Straw Hats and they all had the same expression: distant and frowning. He then looked to

Genevieve, Petrea, and Damian, who wouldn't even have been there if Steven hadn't helped them, and even they were stone faced. But it was Luffy's look that hurt the most. He ran over and grabbed his shirt and tried to look him in the eyes. "Luffy, why? Why are you doing this?! Is it something I did? Is it the Gems?"

"It's...it's just not working out," Luffy couldn't even return Steven's gaze. The boy started to cry harder than he had in a long time.

"WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?!" he yelled. "YOU TOLD ME WE WERE NAKAMA; THAT I WAS A STRAW HAT FOR LIFE! *DOES THAT MEAN NOTHING TO YOU?!*"

"Steven..." Luffy started before completely breaking down. "I CAN'T DO IT!"

"What?!" Steven asked, garbled from his crying.

"We promised each other that we'd do anything we could to get you home Steven!" the pirate captain cried. "This is your chance to do it! But I won't pretend that we don't need you! I just can't live a lie like that!"

Steven just stared at him in shock and then looked to the Gems. From their expressions, this was just as much of a surprise to them as it was to Steven. The Straw Hats legitimately thought this was the best way for Steven to go home safe: by breaking ties with him.

"But...do you really want me to go?" Steven asked sadly. "If you really do, we can still leave as friends...but...but..."

"Oh Steven, we traveled this far because of you!" Petrea was crying just as hard as Luffy was now. "Why would we want you to go? We just want you to be with your family!"

The boy took another look at his friends and saw that everyone except for Zoro and Sanji were crying. Pearl put a hand to her mouth in shock and Amethyst took a step back with a simple "Woah!"

"So that's what you guys were talking about!" Connie gasped, holding back tears herself.

"Do you really have to go?!" Luffy started to beg at Pearl's feet. "We don't want him to!"

"Enough!" Garnet commanded. She stomped her foot down, taking everyone off-balance. "You cared enough about each other to fuse...that says a lot about your character."

Luffy nodded his head like a small child. Connie gave a quick look of astonishment and blushed. Meanwhile, poor Greg was still ten minutes behind in the conversation and hadn't picked up on that part yet.

"If you and Steven shared that bond over the compassion you have about your crew, then we will not break that up" Garnet put her hands on her hips.

"So...we can stay?" Steven's eyes were wide and waiting for that final response.

The Gem nodded but put up her finger. "For now...only until we stop that hooked man and save your princess' people." She took off her sunglasses and gave a stern look to the pirates, who looked a bit unnerved at seeing a three eyed woman. "We have a responsibility to our own dimension and to get Connie back to her parents. This is how it had to be, Pirate Captain Luffy."

Luffy wiped away the tears in his eyes and nodded once again. "I understand!"

"Then permission to come aboard!" Garnet saluted.

Everybody gave Garnet a confused look until Steven ran over and hugged her with all of his might. "Thank you!" he whispered.

"Hold on!" Greg put his foot down. "Don't I have a say in this?! I'm Steven's father, darn it!"

"Oh yeah," Garnet put her sunglasses back on. "Greg, we are all joining a pirate crew. You should join us."

The man took a step back when he realized his son and his friends were all giving him puppy-dog eyes, save Zoro and Sanji, who

looked embarrassed yet encouraging nevertheless. Amethyst elbowed him in the ribs. "Come on Greg! Don't you want to be a pirate? I'll think you'll break their bloodthirsty hearts if you say no!"

"Please, Mr. Universe!" Connie joined in.

"Well, what the heck?" Greg chimed in. "How often does a father and son get to join a pirate crew together that won't try to capsize ships and hold people hostage?"

A cheer broke out as the Straw Hats accepted Connie, Greg, Lion, and the Gems into the crew. They all started to board Scissors the crab and, after a peek at Nami and Petrea's desert outfits, they flew toward Alubarna. Pearl found herself sitting alone at the edge of the crab, feeling ostracized from the others, when Zoro found himself sitting down next to her.

"I wanted to tell you that you have flawless technique," he managed to get out. "I was watching you duel Crocodile. The way you used your staff...it's like you turned it into a dance."

"Oh!" Pearl was caught off-guard. "Um...thanks?"

"It's rare to find one who has such mastery of a blade. I have to ask," Zoro looked to her. "Can you cut through steel?"

"If I put my mind to it, I don't see why not," Pearl chuckled. "You seem rather interested in swordplay...um... Steven's green-haired pirate friend..."

"I am," he replied. "I always appreciate talking to a skilled swordsman. It's my dream to surpass the world's greatest swordsman here...but I wanted to thank you."

"I don't follow," the dainty Gem frowned.

"You've given me another level to aspire to," Zoro grinned.

Pearl was a bit taken back by the man's compliment. The last thing she had expected from this place was for someone to look up to her. Outside of Steven and Connie, she had never experienced something like this before.

It felt good.

"I don't think I caught your name stranger," Pearl extended her hand.

"Zoro," he accepted it. "Roronora Zoro."

"I'll be sure to remember it."

As this was going on, the other Straw Hats were questioning Garnet and Amethyst about their Gem abilities. Amethyst was more than happy to show off and shapeshift for them, while Garnet kept it to short answers.

Connie, meanwhile, sat over next to Steven and nudged him in the shoulder. "I still can't believe we finally found you."

"I still can't believe you guys managed to make it here! Did you guys really see Uncle Grandpa again?"

She nodded. "He was...a bit off...to say the least."

"Yeah! Isn't he great?"

"That's one way of putting it!" she laughed. "So...you fused with the captain of the pirate crew?"

Steven nodded. "It was different than when I fused with you Connie." He began to fidget around, clearly a bit embarrassed to be talking about it. "With Luffy, our connection was based more on our feelings for others...our friends."

"Really?" Connie asked, deeply curious. "What about when we fuse?"

"It's because you are my best friend..." he blushed really hard. "And I really care about you."

"Really?" Connie began to blush just as much. "You mean it?"

As Steven was about to respond, a burst of sand rose up from the surrounding dunes. The familiar golden hook of Crocodile appeared out of nowhere and grabbed Steven right off of Scissors' back.

"GUYS!" he yelled as he was dragged away into the sandy abyss. The first one to spring to action was Luffy, who stretched his arms on Scissors' eyes and catapulted himself after the half-Gem with all of his might.

"AHHH!" Greg called out to his son. "WAIT! We need to stop now!"

"Scissors can't stop so rapidly!" Chopper panicked. "What are we going to do! Danger! Danger!"

The two vanished from sight as the Gems stood up and activated their weapons. "That was Crocodile!" Garnet cried.

"He's taken Steven!" Pearl yelled angrily. "We need to get him back immediately!"

"I wouldn't worry too much," Nami smirked. "Luffy hasn't lost a single fight yet. He's going to mop the floor with that Shishibukai!"

The tall Gem paused and closed her eyes. After a moment her expression soured and looked as if she had just been hit by a truck.

"You used your Future Vision!" Pearl put her hand to her mouth. "What did you see?!"

"Steven and Luffy...they are most likely going to lose this fight."

\*AGITR\*

*\*New Year's Special Treat: A Gem in the Rough Omake!\**

As the Straw Hats were making their way in the Alabasta desert on Scissors' back, Greg felt the need to find out from his son exactly what he and his new friends went through. Unfortunately, he was having a hard time following along.

"...and that's how we got here!" Steven finished explaining to his father.

"Hold on," Greg scratched his head. "I'm still lost. Which one is Miss Valentine again?"

"That would be me!" Petrea waved.

"But your name is Petrea? Is Valentine just your last name?"

"...he's most certainly your father Steven," she sighed. "Charming, but a bit helpless."

"Hmm..." Steven thought about it before snapping his fingers. "I got it! Connie, you said you have your violin with you?"

When she nodded, Steven grinned ear to ear. "Great! Do you know the Major-General's song from *The Pirates of Penzance*?"

"Yeah. Mom really likes to push anything she considers 'classic' on me. Why?"

"I think I know how to get dad to understand!"

Connie pulled out her violin as Steven retrieved his small ukulele. Greg spied the instrument and raised an eyebrow.

"That's not your ukulele."

"I got it for him," Nami explained. "He is our musician after all."

"Ah. So...son...what are you doing?"

"Making all of this clearer for you! Ready Connie?" Steven asked. The girl finished tuning her strings and smiled. "Then ladies, gentlemen, and other assorted animals, I present to you a lovely ballad I call 'The Gem in the Rough!'"

"Aw! He's going to sing!" Pearl blushed. "It's been too long!"

"He sings every other day here," Zoro told her.

"Are the songs any good?" Amethyst asked.

"Eh," Zoro shrugged. "They are hit or miss. We like them anyway."

"Sounds about right."

With that, the two young children started to play their stringed



instruments. The others looked bemused and were curious to see where this was going, save Sanji who was taking the moment to ogle a distracted Pearl.

*"The Gems, they got a reading on this thing they called a Rifting Stone, we went to go reclaim it and I went and wandered off alone. But then I went and tripped on it and then I fell out from the sky; and landed on the boat of two Baroque Works not quite so bad guys,"* Steven acknowledged Petrea and Damian, who were now blushing.

*"Mr. 5 was the name of one and the girl's name was Miss Valentine. They thought that I was weird at first but I decided they were fine. They showed me their sweet powers and I thought that were really neat. Miss Valentine was happy when I said I liked her chocolate treats!"* the boy sang and patted her on the back. He then started to tap the beat of the song as Connie played on her violin. *"Miss Valentine was happy when I said I liked her chocolate treats!"*

*"Miss Valentine was happy when he said he liked her chocolate treats!"* Connie repeated.

*"Miss Valentine was happy when (I/he) said (I/he) liked her chocolate chocolate treats!"*

"...didn't he use this tune back in Spiders Cafe?" Damian whispered.

"Shut up!" Petrea growled.

*"We traveled on the Grand Land sea until we hit Little Garden. It's there that we met Mr. 3 and his little painter friend,"* he sang happily. *"Her code name was Miss Goldenweek. We spent a lot of time and stuff; to become good long lasting friends: the painter and the Gem in the rough!"*

Connie continued to play right to the next verse, checking over to Greg, who seemed to be comprehending everything better than he was when the pirates were trying to just explain it.

*"After painting me a picture, she told me that they were murderers. I couldn't believe what she just said, I wanted to run far from her. I tried to have a heart to heart and as I went and made my plea, our*

*tea party was interrupted by the Straw Hat: Sanji!"* Steven acknowledged the cook, who was still upset that he couldn't light his cigarette.

*"The three of us then tricked her boss, the evil Mr. 0! We then convinced Miss Goldenweek that she could be a hero! We learned her name was Genevieve but slowly she began to fret! You see the evil Mr. 3 had made the Candle Service Set!"*

*"You see the evil Mr. 3 had made the Candle Service Set!"* Connie started.

*"You see the evil Mr. 3 made the Candle Service Set!"* Luffy joined in, catching how this song went.

*"You see the evil Mr. 3 made the Candle Service Service Set!"* the three sang together.

*"We went and saved the Straw Hat pirates and the princess Vivi. Together with the '5 Pair' we then stopped Mr. 3's villainy! With my friends we joined the pirates though it would be very tough, the four of us would help Vivi, with me as the Gem in the rough!"*

He took a deep breath and continued much to the bewilderment of some and to the amusement of others. *"We went and had a party and then learned all the people's names. Mr. 5 was Damian and though a sickness was to blame; Miss Valentine aka Petrea had gotten really sick. We needed to get a doctor. We needed to get one really quick!"*

Steven pointed to Luffy, who was probably more engrossed in the song than Greg was at this point. *"The captain Monkey D. Luffy set sail to find a snowy land; we ended up in Drum Kingdom located on the Drum Island! The only doctor was far away but Luffy knew he had to go; and so we bubbled up and took Petrea out into the frigid snow!"*

*"And so we bubbled up and took Petrea out into the frigid snow!"* Luffy clapped.

*"And so they bubbled up and took Petrea out into the frigid snow?"*

Connie asked, realizing how hard it was to both play an instrument and understand the finer details of a story at the same time.

*"And so we bubbled up and took Petrea out into the frigid frigid snow!"* Steven smiled.

*"A bunch of giant bunnies went and caused a great big avalanche! Petrea flew up in the air, we tried to stop and grab a branch. Luffy and I reached out and we both hoped that it was enough. But an amazing thing happened: he fused with the Gem in the rough!"*

The Gems, who were listening to the song regardless, suddenly took a greater interest in the lyrics. Connie did as well, though her look was decidedly more concerned and embarrassed.

*"The fusion got Petrea back and then climbed up the tall mountain! It realized that it had no name so it would then be Lufven. The crazy doctor helped the girl. My friends, there was no need to fear; because after that we met Chopper, a talking doctor reindeer!"*

"That's me!" Chopper whispered to Greg.

"I gathered."

*"We stopped an evil tyrant king from shooting a flag in his tracks; we begged Chopper to come with us as on our journey we went back! He agreed and on our quest we traveled even faster; to stop Baroque Works from destroying their target: Alabasta!"*

*"To stop Baroque Works from destroying their target: Alabasta?"* Connie asked.

*"To stop Baroque Works from destroying their target: Alabasta!"* Steven nodded.

*"To stop Baroque Works from destroying their target: Ala Alabasta!"* Luffy screamed with joy.

*"It was in the desert kingdom that we thought of our brilliant plan: to stop Baroque Works from their plot, we would do whatever that we can! And so we got trapped in a cage after a few violent scuffs; but then you came to save the day, for them and the Gem in the rough!"*

He let Connie play the final few chords, after which the Straw Hats just stared amazed at him. Finally, Garnet clapped. "That was very well-done Steven."

"Hold on!" Usopp got up and walked over to Steven and started looking the boy over. "Are you telling me that you thought of all of that by yourself off the top of your head?!"

"Yeah..." Steven was starting to get confused. "Why?"

"Steven, you just summarized our entire journey IN SONG!" Usopp was starting to get hysterical. "That isn't normal!"

"Oh, it's because he is half-Gem," Pearl told him.

"What?!"

"Gems, at their core, have an incredibly deep connection with music, even though at one time it was considered a radical form of individualistic expression. We can naturally sing or play a tune at any given time. It comes from having a closer connection to the physical world," Pearl explained.

"That explains a lot," Damian scratched his head.

"Suddenly things are a lot clearer," Genevieve nodded.

"Wait...then why didn't you guys burst into sporadic song when you were explaining your story?" Usopp asked.

"We don't like overdoing it. It can be a bit much sometimes," Garnet shrugged.

"Well Greg," Amethyst asked the man, who was scratching his beard as he took everything in. "Did that help?"

"Amazingly," he started to laugh. "Yes. Yes it did!"

# **The Shichibukai And The Half-Gem**

"We need to turn around immediately!" Pearl shouted to Chopper.

The situation was tense on the back of Scissors. Garnet's proclamation that the pair would lose sent shockwaves throughout the group. Practically at once, everyone began to panic. Even Lion howled in pain.

"Gah! I just got Steven back! Don't tell me he's going to die?!" Greg started to wail at Garnet's feet. "What can we do?!"

Zoro tied the black bandana he was holding onto on his head and gripped his swords. "It's simple: we charge after Crocodile and get them back."

"It won't work that way," Garnet shook her head. "He can't be touched unless you electrocute him...or maybe splash him with water..."

"Meaning Garnet is the only one capable of stopping him," Nami finished. "Can you handle it on your own? I can help with my Clima Tact..."

"It's alright, Navigator Nami," the Gem looked to her peers and crossed her arms. "But the kind of help I need is more of a Gem thing."

"Woah! Are we going to form Alexandrite?" Amethyst started to get excited. "This is going to be amazing!"

"No," Garnet shook her head. "One of you needs to stay here and watch over the others."

"We can handle ourselves!" Usopp boasted. "I once took down a man with thirty thousand followers all with my slingshot!"

"Darn, bro," Amethyst whistled. "That's hardcore!"

"Having a Gem on your side can help defuse the situation in this

country rather easily," she explained. "Besides, even if Crocodile were to be stopped now, you still would need to end the civil war, which means defeating all of those Officer Agents you mentioned."

"So, then what do you mean by 'Gem thing' if we aren't fusing?" Amethyst asked.

"Simple: I need to fuse with one of you. I'll leave it to you to decide," Garnet shot them a serious look. "But choose quickly or else Steven will die!"

All eyes were on the two Gems, who were both flustered and embarrassed at being put on the spot. Neither knew exactly what to do because both of them enjoyed fusing with Garnet.

"Rock, Paper, Scissors?" Amethyst offered.

"If we must."

\*AGITR\*

The sand was coarse and rough as Steven found himself flung into a dune. The boy pulled himself out and shook it out, as it managed to get everywhere in his desert clothes. He tried to cough some out, but stopped when he found himself at Crocodile's feet.

"You!" Steven howled and went to charge at him before jumping straight through his body and was stopped from hitting the ground by Miss Allsunday, who miraculously sprouted a second set of arms in the sand to catch him. The man started to laugh at the poor child.

"Tiger Millionaire, you have spirit...but you have also gotten on my last nerves," he frowned. "I've come to realize that the two factors that could jeopardize my plan are you and the Princess Vivi. I've already had Miss Allsunday here contact the Officer Agents in Alubarna to be on the lookout for her. That just leaves you."

"What...what are you going to do to me?" Steven put on a brave face. "Try to bore me to death with some kind of monologue?"

"I'll be keeping an eye on you," Miss Allsunday smiled. "My partner does not want to risk angering your 'Gem' companions."

"That's where you are wrong, Miss Allsunday," Crocodile grinned maliciously. "I've been thinking about what you said, Tiger Millionaire; specifically how I am a 'bad guy.' It occurred to me that keeping you alive is exactly what a 'bad guy' would do and would lead to their downfall. As such, I plan on killing you right here."

Crocodile raised his hook and went down to stab Steven much to Miss Allsunday's surprise. Instinctively, Steven summoned his shield and blocked it. He pushed back the hook and adopted a battle stance. He gulped in fear but dared not show it. "I won't back down, codfish! No matter what, I will fight for Vivi's country!"

"Crocodile, what's the point?" Miss Allsunday asked. "Killing him like this would rile up his companions, which I will remind you actually pose a threat to you. It makes no sense to..."

The Shishibukai flashed his hook in her direction and gritted his teeth. "Are you questioning my leadership, Miss Allsunday, after everything I promised you? Is that wise?"

"I suppose not," she turned away and started walking into the desert.

"Where the hell are you going?" Crocodile yelled to her.

"Ahead to Alubarna; to where the object that you promised me no doubt is," she chuckled. Then she turned to Steven and winked. "I do suppose I should be saying goodbye to you, Tiger Millionaire...or Steven, if you'd prefer that. It was fun knowing you."

"Wait!" Steven called back. "Don't go!"

"I swear, I'll never know what goes on in that woman's mind," Crocodile muttered. He went into his coat and pulled out a small hourglass. He threw it on the ground near Steven's feet.

"Three minutes," he explained. "That is how long you have left to live. I want to see if there is any truth to your previous boasting."

"What?!" Steven was now beside himself. This was impossible. How could he hope to defeat a person made of sand...someone that even the Gems had problems with?! It felt that there was no way he could

get out of this alive.

Yet, Steven knew that even if there was no chance for him, there would be a chance for Vivi to save her people. Any distraction he could cause for the others was worth it in his eyes. He had already thought he was going to die once today; what was one more time?

"Do you have a problem with that?" he taunted. Crocodile then put his hand on his hook as he waited for a response, his eyes shifting at the sands falling down in the hourglass.

Steven forced himself to smile as he stared death in the face. "Not at all, codfish."

He ran at Crocodile, shield in hand and jumped up. He slammed the shield down as hard as he could into the man, but he just dissolved into a cloud of sand, causing Steven to lose the shield in the process. Sensing a counterattack, he formed his bubble around him, keeping him safe from Crocodile's next attack.

**"Desert Girasole!"** Crocodile had summoned a sand dagger and slashed the area where Steven was protected. Unfortunately, what Steven wasn't counting on was the ground opening up and turning into quicksand below him.

Steven now found his bubble sinking into the Alabasta sand. Thinking fast, he jumped up, breaking his pink protection and forced a second bubble to appear at his feet. Finding footing on top of his next bubble, he sprang off of it and flew towards Crocodile.

"Rushing headfirst are we? You must know you can't touch me," he sighed.

"Who says I'm trying to touch you?" Steven responded. As he got close enough to Crocodile, he summoned another bubble around Crocodile himself, encapsulating him inside of a pink prison.

"Impressive trick!" Crocodile started to hammer away at the inside of it with all of his might. Steven focused all of his energy to keep it together. Every precious second mattered to Steven; not just because of the hourglass but to help aid the people of this world.



Unfortunately, Crocodile had turned himself into a sandstorm, breaking free from his confinement. The boy panted as he realized that the effort practically drained him. The Shishibukai was now on him, eyeing his prey one last time.

**"Gum Gum Pistol!"** a most welcoming voice roared.

The rubber fist of Luffy came flying out of nowhere and struck Crocodile in the face. Taken back momentarily, Crocodile stumbled backwards. He felt his face and realized that the boy had actually hit him. "Water?"

"Luffy!" Steven cried with joy. "You're here!"

"Steven, run. Now! This is my fight!" Luffy ordered. He went to grab him to toss him away but Steven shook his head.

"He's after me now! This is OUR fight Luffy," he winked. Luffy's eyes widened with understanding and got the idea.

"Oh yeah, buddy! Let's take down this Crocodile codfish together!" Luffy grinned. The captain grabbed Steven's hand and twirled him around.

After a moment, the blinding pink light of fusion filled the air as two forms became one. Once Rose Quartz's gem stopped glowing, Lufven was reborn.

"Alright! Time to..." Lufven began before being stopped mid-sentence.

"You had the element of surprise, boy. I will give you that," Crocodile informed Lufven with no trace of emotion in his voice. "You squandered it by wasting time dancing."

Lufven looked down and felt pain unlike either Steven or Luffy had ever experienced. Just as Lufven had formed himself, Crocodile had taken the opportunity to stab the unaware fusion straight through the chest. The man lifted him up using his hook, causing Lufven to howl in anguish.

"No matter how powerful a technique may be, leaving yourself wide

open will always lead to defeat and death," he told them. It appeared that Crocodile found no joy in the action like he was hoping, but rather did it as if one were performing a monotonous task.

He threw the limp body of the fusion directly into the quicksand and watched as he started to sink away. "I have trained my Devil Fruit abilities to perfection...I know everything that is happening in the sand. Goodbye, Straw Hat Luffy and Tiger Millionaire...or whatever bastardized name you are calling yourself."

He made a motion as if he were about to step away when he was alerted to a giant tremor in the ground. Crocodile looked to his falling foe, but he was far too paralyzed to be doing that.

What was happening?

In the distance he saw a most startling sight: an enormous woman making her way toward him. The sudden appearance of this creature both fascinated and irritated the man. While Crocodile had known various giants in the past, this woman was far different and much more unsettling.

Her skin was a fair shade of vermilion with apricot hair in the shape of a pyramid. She had a pointy nose and sunglasses that covered what Crocodile made out to be four eyes. It appeared that she was wearing a black tuxedo and had four arms, two of which were gloved.

"What the hell is this supposed to be?!" Crocodile found himself making his way closer to her. "Some kind of magic show?!"

"A magic show, you ask?" the being began to laugh. "Ho ho ho! My dear Crocodile, I do believe that you are under the 'illusion' that I am in the mood to put on a show!"

Looking at the quicksand in the ground, her mood immediately soured. "Unfortunately for you, that moment has passed. Tell me Crocy, do you know what happens when a Crocodile is struck by a lightning charged war hammer?"

She bent down close and began to whisper. "I'll give you a hint: it's

the same thing that happens to everything else." She readopted her smile and took a bow. "For one day only, you get to bare witness to a one-of-a-kind spectacle: the trouncing of a man with a hook by yours truly: the fabulous Sardonyx!"

Crocodile cocked his head in confusion. "...what a comical creature you are."

\*AGITR\*

Nico Robin was not pleased with her partner at the present moment.

Although she had put up with Crocodile for the past several years, she knew their partnership was coming to an end. Crocodile's only interest in her was her ability to read Poneglyphs while Robin's only interest in him was the hope that the Poneglyph in question that he wanted her to read would have any information on her true goal: the Void Century.

Since she was eight, Robin had managed to detach herself emotionally from all of those around her. She had no friends anymore. The World Government saw to that when they blew up her peaceful home with their Buster Call. All she had left was the desire to learn more about the Void Century.

Then she met Monkey D. Luffy and Steven the Tiger Millionaire.

Luffy intrigued her almost immediately due to the D. in his name: the same D. Jaguar D. Saul had. Why were men who carried this middle letter so ambitious and different than the rest of the world? She was impressed when she met him after they left Whiskey Peak and had been saddened to hear of his demise at the hands of Mr. 3.

Thankfully the reports of his demise were greatly exaggerated.

Steven, on the other hand, seemed like a good soul. He reminded Robin of herself before her mother left: happy, and not yet hardened by the world around him. It surprised her just how far he was willing to go to denounce Crocodile in the name of Vivi's people, as well as how he managed to convince some of Baroque Works' best agents to defect.

However, the biggest reason Robin found Steven interesting was his constant professions that she was a good person. The boy verbally brought down a well-respected Marine captain in defense of her and had treated her with nothing but respect despite the situations Robin was forced to put him in.

For Crocodile to go back on his plan to use Steven as bait to draw out the princess was unacceptable. Admittedly, Robin knew that kidnapping wasn't exactly the most morally sound thing to do, but she had planned on making sure he got out of it alive and unharmed. As such, Crocodile had gone a bit too far in her eyes. She never trusted the man and had planned on betraying him as soon as she had the Poneglyph in her sight. However, she had decided that the time to do so might have arrived sooner than expected. She would kill Crocodile, force the king to show her the ancient stone, and slip away undetected.

But first she needed to catch Crocodile off-guard and, if she could help it, save the boy as well.

Using the abilities from her Devil Fruit, she hid herself from sight by riding on her personal accelegrator transport and created a single eyeball on the hourglass in the sand when the fighting began. Doing so allowed her to gauge a proper strategy to employ against her partner.

All of that was promptly thrown out of the window when Robin saw Luffy running aimlessly through the desert. Deciding to help while staying out of his view, Robin created several hands to guide the way to the fight, including one that threw the small container of water she kept on her at all times on his fists. The young pirate was confused and interested at first, but his commitment to his friend took over and he rushed to aid him.

Then two things happened which Robin couldn't explain: the two fused together and a giant, four armed woman in a tuxedo appeared.

Robin was taken back by the sheer absurdity of the woman. Although she always held giants in a higher respect than most others, this woman was different...more alien. It was when she

heard her announce herself as Sardonyx that she made the connection to Steven's friends, who also had rock-like names. Still, she was very curious how a fight like that would play out.

The critical thing, however, was to use this opportunity to her advantage. As Crocodile and the woman started to fight, Robin made her way to the quicksand where the hybrid of Luffy and Steven were presently being sucked into. She closed her eyes and crossed her hands over her chest. **"Cuatro Fleur!"**

Focusing her abilities into the quicksand, Robin summoned four of her hands to pull him from the shifting sands. It took considerable energy to do so while the sand was still moving, but in the end she succeeded. Creating more hands, she carried the unconscious being away from the fight, ensuring that he would remain unharmed.

"This stab wound is very bad," Robin said, examining his tattered shirt. She started to unbutton it when she finally got a good look at the being's face. It had the roundness of the boy but with the scar of the pirate. It seemed like a perfect hybrid of the two, something that Robin wished she could study more.

The second the shirt was unbuttoned, the hybrid began to cough. This took the woman back, as she had not expected him to be able to do anything in this condition. "Mi...Mi...Miss..."

"Save your breath," she told him bitterly. "If you want to get out of this alive, you need to conserve your strength. This is a serious wound."

"P...put you...your hand to...to my mouth," he managed to get out.

"What?!"

"P...lea...please!" he begged. "Do t...thi...this!"

Though slightly repulsed and confused by the request, Robin felt like she owed it to the Steven-half of this creature to follow his wishes, if only to make up for Crocodile's rudeness. She put her hand by his mouth and with all of his might, he spit on her.

Robin looked down at it with disgust and waited for him to explain

what to do with it. "Ru...rub it..."

"On your chest," she sighed. "I gathered that." She pressed the saliva onto the bloody wound and began to swirl it around. The feeling was utterly uncomfortable, but she found herself curious to see what his plan was.

Then she began to gasp. The wound itself began to disappear before her eyes. In a few moments, he was completely healed. "How...how was that possible?!"

"The power of love!" the hybrid laughed after coughing up some more sand. "Yuck!"

The creature cocked its head and stared at Robin in confusion. "Um...why did you save me?"

"Why do people with the name of D. feel the need to fight losing battles?" Robin countered.

"I have no idea what that means!" he frowned.

"Then I have no idea why I saved you," she allowed herself to smile, a rare genuine one. "Your friend has been keeping Crocodile busy in your absence."

"Friend?" he asked. Robin merely pointed behind him, to where the large woman was twirling her body around while wielding a large hammer. The fusion's jaw literally fell to the floor as his eyes widened in amazement. "Giant woman! It's Sardonyx!" He clapped excitedly. "Wait...who's Sardonyx?" he asked himself. "The fusion of Pearl and Garnet! This is great!"

"...are you having a conversation with yourself?"

"Yeah! It's a fusion thing!" he smiled. "Thank you for saving me again! I knew you weren't a bad guy!"

Robin merely chuckled. "You don't know me at all, Monkey D. Steven."

"Lufven!" he said proudly. "I'm Lufven! Now if you'll excuse me, I'm

going to stop your partner! I know we'll see each other again, so I'll thank you properly then!"

With that, he turned his legs into springs and jumped away toward Crocodile and Sardonyx's duel. Robin found herself staring at the sight of two beings so perfectly in sync that they literally fused together and fought out of love and compassion. It actually touched Robin's heart slightly to know that such people existed in this world.

Still, she had work to do and did not want to explain herself to a giant, four armed woman carrying a war hammer twice her size.

\*AGITR\*

Crocodile had made a critical error when he began this fight: he did not take the giant woman seriously.

As a Shishibukai, Crocodile was used to punks with big egos and high aspirations coming after him all the time. This was nothing new to him. He had toppled giants, long arms, minks, fishmen, and even some of the Marines' best Vice Admirals in the past. It was this sense of superiority that made pirating seem dull and caused him to lose sight of his own dreams and ambitions. So when a giant woman who made a fight seem more like a comedy routine than a life or death situation came across his path, Crocodile anticipated an easy fight.

How wrong he was.

**"Desert Spada!"** Crocodile roared, sending blade after blade at her. She jumped in the air ever so gracefully and twirled away from each and every attack he sent at her.

"I'm sorry, was that supposed to hit me? I was too busy admiring my own dexterity that I didn't notice," she laughed again.

"Keep talking!" Crocodile was officially getting annoyed at her. He had never encountered someone who literally treated him as if he were an ant. He found he did not like it. **"Crescent Cutlass!"**

Using his one good hand, he swung his arm forward and sliced the ground where Sardonyx was standing and prepared to drain her

moisture dry. As it hit her, she merely giggled. "Aw, that tickled!"

"That's impossible! You...you're like that Gem woman!" Crocodile gasped. He stared down at his hook, realizing that even the scorpion venom in the second layer wouldn't do any damage if she couldn't be poisoned. "What even are you people?!"

"Oh honey, I AM that Gem 'woman!'" she grinned. "And guess who else I am?"

She displayed her hands and put them behind her back. Twisting her chest around to look at them, she let out an exaggerated "Oh my!" Then she turned her head back to Crocodile. "Oh you are just going to love this!"

Snapping her other set of fingers, her body realigned and showcased the new improvement to the body: Garnet's gauntlets. Crocodile's eyes widened with fear as he recognized exactly what they were. "Remember what I said about the show? Well I've changed my mind about it. I AM in the mood for a performance after all! Take your places; it's about to begin!"

Creating one of Pearl's staffs in one hand and tossing it up in the air, she collided the gauntlets on it. The two weapons merged into a comically oversized war hammer. With a wink, she wiggled it around, causing it to crackle with electricity. "I'm going to need a volunteer from the audience for my next trick. Any takers?"

Realizing that he was about to lose this fight, Crocodile started to blend himself in with the surrounding sand to try to escape. However, the giant woman merely jumped up high and slammed her hammer into the ground, sending shockwaves of electricity flowing through the dunes. The surrounding sand began to jut out into jagged glass forms as Crocodile found himself unable to do anything but cry out in agony. For the present moment, he was able to experience pain.

Of course, this was the moment where Crocodile found himself punched in the face by a rubbery clenched fist.

"Oh my stars and garters! I did not even see you get out of that pit!"



Sardonyx stopped her assault and looked at the new combatant.  
"And who might this little charmer be?"

"It's me, Sardonyx!" he waved. "I'm Lufven! I'm what happens when Steven fuses with Luffy!"

"Well, it's a pleasure to make your acquaintance! I guess the two of us need to stick around a bit more, am I right? Ho ho ho ho!" she laughed pompously at her own joke.

"Shihashihashi! That's great!" Lufven joined her.

"What...what the hell IS this?!" Crocodile got up and wiped the blood off of his face. "How...how are you alive?! I stabbed you!"

Lufven's face turned dark as he cracked his knuckles once more.  
"You did. And it hurt. But pain in nothing compared to what Vivi must be feeling! It's time to show you I'm not just some rookie kid who boasts! I will be the Pirate King and a Crystal Gem!" he roared as he charged toward him. "And I! Will! Surpass! You!"

**"GUM GUM QUARTZ CROQUET!"** Lufven shouted as he threw a punch at the man. Instead of connecting with him, a pink energy surrounded Lufven's fist and trapped him in another bubble. Crocodile at the walls with everything he had and found he was unable to escape.

"NOW, SARDONYX!" Lufven called to her. She looked around and pointed to herself.

"For me? I'm touched! I do love improv!" She twirled her energized hammer around, creating a miniature sandstorm behind it. Sardonyx went to hit the bubbled Shishibukai and stopped just short of touching it. Lufven then stretched his chest into an arch and planted himself in front of the bubble. "Thank you for watching. You were an unpleasant person but a great audience!"

The giant woman merely tapped the bubble and it went flying. Inside Crocodile screamed as he realized he had no control of where he was going. The electricity from the hammer continued to fry him as he flew, finally knocking him out as he flew above his precious Rain

Dinners.

\*AGITR\*

"Sir, we've got Headquarters on the line!" a Marine officer informed Captain Smoker.

The cigar chomping man had just arrived back at his ship and had demanded a direct line to his superiors immediately. He considered the situation in Alabasta to be a disaster. Crocodile was being allowed to run rampant and the entire kingdom was about to topple apart. The worst part of it was the only two forces standing in his way were the Marines and a group of pirates he swore to bring to justice.

"Good. I'll be taking the message in my quarters. Get me if I'm needed. We are going to need to start focusing our energy on the surrounding ships and figuring out which are involved in this and which aren't. Captain Hina should be meeting up with us soon to help us with this situation," Smoker nodded, taking the Den Den Mushi with him as he closed the door to his room.

"Captain Smoker, report," the voice on the other side ordered. "What news do you have from Alabasta?"

"Listen up! Crocodile has staged a civil war between the people of this land and the Nefeltari family! His end goal is to completely take over the country and impose his own will on the land; creating, in his own words, a 'utopia!'" Smoker explained very tensely. "In addition, the Straw Hat pirates and a group of magical alien female invaders have joined forces with the Princess Vivi and are attempting to stop Crocodile on their own."

"Magical aliens?" the voice repeated back to him. "Do you really expect us to believe this fairy tale?"

"Look, I could give a damn what you believe about that! All that matters is that Crocodile and his men need to be stopped before the sand runs red with the blood of the innocents!" Smoker yelled. "We need reinforcements if we are to keep this a Marine controlled operation!"

"If Crocodile is attempting something, we will discuss further action on our own," the snail replied calmly. "We will require further proof to justify this as a threat to the world..."

Just then, the door flew open and a young Marine stumbled into his room. He was visibly shaken and in complete disbelief.

"Um...Captain Smoker...sir?!"

"Haven't you ever heard of knocking?" Smoker growled. "I'm in the middle of giving a report!"

"But sir...you need to see this!"

Sighing, Smoker got up and brought the snail with him. He wasn't expecting anything, but when he stepped outside, he stopped moving and dropped the Den Den Mushi on the deck of his ship.

"Playing through!" a voice called from the distance. An incredibly large four armed giant woman was using an equally large hammer to swat a pink ball that had landed from the sky around. The sight was shocking enough, but looking closer at the ball, he made out the form of Crocodile inside of it. It was only then that he noticed the little man being carried in one of the hands.

"Straw Hat?! Then that's the kid...but that doesn't look like him..." Smoker tried to make sense of it all.

In no time, the woman hit the ball towards the Marine ship and the crew watched as it sailed overhead and landed into the water. The second it hit the ocean, the bubble disappeared and the still form of Crocodile started to sink to the water's floor.

"Oops! I guess I don't know my own strength!" the woman gasped. She jumped into the water herself and grabbed Crocodile up with two of her hands and placed him on the Marine ship. "Here you go fellows! A special delivery from the lovely Sardonyx and my lovely guest stars!"

The Marines were all frozen as the body of the being in the woman's hand split up into two people. As Smoker expected, it was Straw Hat Luffy and the Universe boy. But how had they fused and, more

importantly, how did they capture Crocodile?!

Two of his men produced sea stone handcuffs and bound the traitor's wrists and legs. They then picked him up and carried him into the brig past the dumbfounded Smoker, who could not make sense of the situation.

"Hey Smokey!" Luffy waved to him. "You said you wanted Crocodile, but we got to him first! Still, here you go! Take him so he can't hurt Vivi's country anymore! We kicked his ass for you really well!"

"Cur..." Steven started to chide him, but shrugged. "Oh what the heck? We beat Crocodile!"

"We did, Steven!" Luffy went and hugged his companion. The two started to dance again. Steven's stomach started to glow, but they broke apart before anything else could happen.

"Straw Hat?!" Smoker yelled to him. "Why?! How?!"

"I'll tell you later!" he yelled back. "We've got to find Vivi and tell her the good news!"

"You heard the man!" Sardonyx bowed. "We must be off! Thank you, fine officers of the law! We'd love to stay and chat, but we have to fly! Toodles!"

"Thank you, Captain Smoker! We appreciate the help!" Steven started to wave to the troops.

A Marine officer snapped a picture of the woman, who posed for it, and then started sprinting away from the dock, into the town, and then away back into the desert, leaving Smoker a combination of confusion and rage.

"Smoker?" the Den Den Mushi called out once more. "What is happening there?! Smoker!"

The man picked up the receiver and stared at it. Choosing his words carefully, he finally spoke. "You want proof? I've got your damn proof..."

# The Absurdity of Alabasta

"Do we know where they are yet? Huh? Huh? Huh?" Miss Merry Christmas yelled to her companions.

Outside of Alubarna, the remainder of Baroque Works were waiting for the Straw Hats to arrive. They had received word that the rebel army was only a mere half hour away from storming the city and the kingdom was in an uproar. Using his powers, Mr. 2 had successfully incited conflict between the two factions by posing as Vivi's father, King Nefeltari Cobra, after capturing the man in question. Unfortunately for the king, he remained chained to the side of a cliff on the West Gate entrance of the city.

Word had not yet reached them about Crocodile's defeat.

Mr. 2 was not present at the meeting, for he was tasked with waiting for Vivi at the Royal Palace. With the upcoming battle, it was practically devoid of life, making it the perfect point to ambush her should she make herself known.

"From the sound of Miss Allsunday's call, we should be anticipating a group of pirates any time now. I know it takes a while to get here from Rainbase, but at this rate the rebels will beat them to the punch," Miss Doublefinger sighed. "It looks like they won't be able to stop the fighting after all."

"But what if we get stuck in the fighting, huh?" Miss Merry Christmas countered. "What then?"

"Then? We don't have to do anything. We stay out of the way until we see the pirates that we have been assigned to kill," Mr. 1 groaned. "It's fairly obvious if you think about it."

"...you know," the older woman sighed. "This waiting is boring boring boring! I wish that damn Tiger kid wasn't a traitor; at least he passed the time in an interesting way."

"If you wanted music, maybe Mr. 2 can sing you a song when he gets back," Miss Doublefinger laughed.

The comment caused Mr. 1 to shudder. "Don't joke about that. Ever."

"Ssssssssssoooooooooommmmmmmmmeeeeeeeeeeooooooooonnnnnneeeeeee iiiisssssss," the large Mr. 4 started to tell them, but since he took forever to get anything out, the Agents didn't know what he was saying.

"What was that Mr. 4? Speak faster, you idiot!" Miss Merry Christmas demanded of her partner. She pulled out her binoculars and stared out into the Alabasta desert. "Hey! An accelegator! It must be the boss!"

The Officer Agents all got up to meet the banana gator-like creature. To their surprise, it did not contain Crocodile, but rather Miss Allsunday. She gazed over to the imprisoned Cobra and gave a small grin.

"Well, don't you all look like you are having fun?" Miss Allsunday deadpanned. "I take it the Straw Hats have not arrived yet?"

"We've just assumed they took longer than you thought in Rainbase," Miss Doublefinger explained. "I assume you have orders?"

The woman paused for a second and considered her words carefully. "I do indeed. Crocodile now wishes the Straw Hats and the princess to be kept alive. When they arrive, do what you must to incapacitate them, but at least attempt to keep them in one piece."

The woman gave a sharp look to Mr. 1. "Do not kill them. Do you understand?"

"As you wish," he sighed disappointingly.

Miss Allsunday then walked over to the king and looked at his bindings. "I will be escorting the king to the next part of our plan. We don't want the rebels to be without a target, do we?"

She stood the king up and began to walk him up the stairs into to city. "Good luck, all!" she called to them.

"Ccccccoooooooooommmmmiiiiinnnnnggggg," Mr. 4 finally finished.

\*AGITR\*

The Royal Palace was practically deserted. As most of army had fortified itself at the four gates of the city, nobody had been left behind to guard the mighty stronghold. It was a rare sight for Vivi to see and it was one that broke her heart.

It was also why she realized that it would be the perfect symbol to destroy in the name of peace.

Making her way into Alubarna was tough enough on her own, but she knew she had to deliver the Black Den Den Mushi to her father as soon as possible. Though she had passed several soldiers, she tried to dodge every one of them on the off chance they were a Baroque Works double agent. She did not know who she could trust.

From what she gathered, the rebel faction was set to attack the city anytime now to make a point to her father about the state of the country; a state caused behind the scenes by Crocodile. It made Vivi's blood boil that such a heinous person existed in this world, but she had everything that she needed with her to bring him down.

While in Yuba with both the Straw Hats and her old friend Toto, they had overheard Steven, Petrea, Genevieve, and Damian risking themselves by speaking to Crocodile directly. Vivi kept the Black Den Den Mushi going even after the other Straw Hats left her to mount a rescue mission, hearing everything that Crocodile told him up until Luffy's arrival. Though she was tempted to continue listening in, she knew that it would distract her from her goal.

"Who's there?" a familiar voice called from deeper in the palace. "More looters?! I already begged you to evacua..." the voice stopped as its owner stepped into view.

An older gentleman with tied-off beard and curly, long black hair was now staring right at Vivi. The princess stopped and returned the gaze, running right to him. "Papa!"

"Vivi?! What are you doing here?! It's dangerous! The rebels are

coming!"

"Papa, there isn't a need to worry about that," Vivi started to cry. "Listen, did you get my message with Carue?"

"Carue...?" Cobra scratched his beard and frowned. Vivi was confused, as there was no way that he didn't know who her duck was. "I don't recall Carue coming by...regardless, what was the message my dear?"

Vivi dismissed her misgivings as Carue being held up by the army. "Papa, listen! This entire civil war has been set up by..." she stopped as she realized just how long it had been since she sent Carue out. There was no conceivable way that the duck had not arrived at the palace. "...a terrible dancer named Mr. 2!"

"I am not a terrible dancer, young lady!" Cobra stamped his foot in anger. After a second he realized what he did and smacked his head. "Whoopsie! Guess you got me!" Cobra put his hand to his face, revealing the familiar visage of Mr. 2.

Vivi, preparing for this, reached into her dress and produced her personal weapons. "**Peacock Slasher!**"

The okama twirled away from the oncoming weapon and jumped up in the air to where Vivi was running off too. He grabbed her by the face and karate chopped the back of her neck, knocking her out.

"And now the final curtain my sweet!" Mr. 2 laughed as he prepared the killing blow. At that moment, his Baby Den Den Mushi started to ring. "Oh? Hold on, sugar; daddy has to take this! Kay?"

He took out the small creature and answered it with his usual flair. "Hellllllloooooooo, Zero-chan! What can I dooooo foooooor yooooou?"

"You are close, Mr. 2," a decidedly female voice answered from the other end.

"Oh, Allsunday-chan! It's you! I've got the little hussie right in front of me! I was just about to finish her off!"

"Disregard that order," Miss Allsunday remained neutral. "Keep up



appearances as the king while remaining out of sight with the princess. She is to remain alive and unharmed. Understand?"

He looked to the fallen princess on the floor and gulped.  
"...gotcha..."

"The same goes for the Straw Hat pirates and the defected members of Baroque Works. Do what you must, but they are not to be killed."

"What?! But..."

"Do you really want to question the boss?" Miss Allsunday asked coolly.

Looking once again at the still princess on the floor, he gulped.  
"Nooooooooope! No way!"

"Good. Await further instructions on this line," she ended the conversation.

Mr. 2, realizing the gravity of his situation, ran around to look for some rope to bind the princess before she woke up and took out her anger on her. "GAAAAHHHHHHH! THIS IS NOT GOOOOOOOD!"

\*AGITR\*

The giant crab known as Scissors had stopped at the Sandora River, unable to progress any further. As such, the Straw Hats were a tad annoyed.

"Chopper, get him to move!" Nami demanded. "We can't waste any more time while he is deciding what to do!"

"Scissors says he hates water! He won't cross it for anything!" Chopper was panicking.

"That river is still pretty wide," Sanji observed. "Swimming would take all day..."

"Longer, since you would have to drag the three of us," Petrea pointed out, acknowledging Chopper and Damian. "This is shaping

up to be an impossible task..."

"Maybe Lion could swim us over?" Connie offered, before looking to the creature, who was out like a light.

"I could always fly over as an owl or something," Amethyst suggested. The Gem had been feeling rather left out after losing to Pearl and tried to find any way that she could help out to make up for it. "When I'm on the other side, I can summon my whip and bring you all over!"

"Can your whip even get that far?" Connie asked. "It seems like it would come up short...by a lot..."

"What about carrying us?" Usopp tried to join in. "Can you pick each of us up in your owl form?"

"Only one way to find out!" Amethyst's gem started to glow and in no time she became a stout, purple owl. She flew above Greg and grabbed on to his shoulders.

"What?! Why am I the guinea pig?!" Greg wailed as he got lifted up off of Scissors' back.

"Well you're the heaviest one here, duh," Amethyst rolled her eyes. "If I'm gonna try this with anyone, it has to be you."

"How the heck do you know that I'm the heaviest one here?!" he was clearly offended.

"Dude, look around!"

Greg sighed as he realized there was no way to argue that fact, save Lion who could fend for himself. "...at least I have the best beard here..."

The purple owl made it about halfway across the river before a large creature rose up out of the water. Amethyst backed away in shock, dropping Greg in the process. Greg screamed as plummeted into the water in front of the fish. It stared at him with hunger in its eyes.

"Uh...nice fishy?" Greg smiled, hoping it would go away. All hopes

were dashed when it opened up its mouth and revealed its large, pointed teeth. "NO! NOT NICE FISHY!"

He reached to grab his lightsaber but realized it was too hard to hold onto and swim at the same time. As such, he started to swim away as fast as he could. "AMETHYST! A LITTLE HELP PLEASE!"

Summoning her whip in owl form, she began to attack the giant catfish away from Greg as he paddled back to the side where the others were. The Straw Hats, on the other hand, just could not look away at the absurdity that was an owl whipping a catfish.

"...this is wrong on so many levels," Sanji just shook his head.

"Words fail me," Damian did the same.

"I want to paint that," Genevieve said. She looked around and then realized she still had none of her materials with her. "...aw..."

Connie, seeing this, went into her backpack and pulled out a small white device. Flipping it up and aiming it at Amethyst, she pressed a button and a light flashed. "It's okay Genevieve. I took a picture of it. That way you can paint it later!"

"...what sorcery is this?" Usopp asked, grabbing the small brick. "What do you call this...thing?"

"A cell phone."

"Really? And what does it do to make it so cellular?" Usopp poked the buttons, trying to get it to do something.

"Um...well it's not a smartphone like Steven's since my mom doesn't believe that a child needs one at my age, but it takes pictures and sends text messages to other phones!"

"A likely story! Prove it! Take my picture."

"Okay!" she smiled, accepting the device back and aiming it at Usopp. She pressed a button and showed it to him. "See?"

"AH! IT STOLE MY SOUL!" Usopp freaked out and backed away

from the device.

"...you're an idiot," Nami hit him in the back of his head.

Genevieve walked over to look at the small picture and stared at it intently. "Does this...cell phone have other pictures?" she asked.

"It sure does!" With that, Connie shared with the girl several pictures of her and Steven that they took over the past year, much to Genevieve's amazement.

"Thank you," she said when they concluded. By this point, Greg had returned to shore and back up on Scissors' back. He was getting calmed down by Chopper, who was afraid he would suffer a heart attack.

"For what?" Connie asked confused.

"For sharing that with me," she responded in a soft voice. "Those must have been special times for you to keep them with you."

"They were," Connie was still puzzled by her response. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine...you do know that Steven cares about you a lot, right?" Genevieve asked Connie, who nodded. "I'm glad to see you care for him too."

Before Connie could properly respond, Amethyst returned back to their side of the shore and flew back up to them, changing back into her natural form. "Well, that fish thing won't be a bother to us anymore."

"Don't tell me you killed it!" Connie asked fearfully.

"Nah, I just beat it up a lot and then those things joined in," she nonchalantly pointed to a bunch of familiar creatures waving to them.

"Kung Fu Dugongs?" the Straw Hats, save the former Baroque Works members, said at the same time.

"Those things Luffy trained near Erumalu?" Nami was shocked. "But what are they doing here?"

"He did what now?" Damian asked.

Chopper listened as he tried to make out what they were saying. "Hmm...they said they couldn't sit by and let their fellow students die."

"What does that mean?" Amethyst asked.

"Kyahahaha! It means they think we are Straw Hat's disciples!" Petrea laughed. "How cute!"

"How totally off the mark," Zoro shook his head. "So are we doing this or not? Now that there's no distraction, let's get across."

"...if I had my paints we could have made the catfish our friend..." Genevieve grumbled.

"Did somebody say friend?!" a loud, theatrical voice called out.

"Ugh" Amethyst groaned. "She's back."

"Oh, you mean that weird giant woman that I still can't comprehend," Usopp nodded. "WAIT, IF SHE'S BACK THEN THEY DID IT!"

"What?!" most of the Straw Hats said at once.

"Didn't you guys have any faith at all in your captain?" Zoro shook his head. "I knew he could do it."

"Please, it was probably Miss Show-Off there," Amethyst grumbled. It was clear that she was not Sardonyx's biggest fan.

The Gem fusion in question jumped into view with one hand behind her back. She struck a pose and used two of her hands to make a drum roll. "For your viewing pleasure, I give you our returning heroes: Steven Universe and Monkey D. Luffy!"

The remaining hand appeared in front and revealed the young boy and the pirate captain each taking a bow. "Guys! We did it! We did

it!"

"We kicked Crocodile's ass!" Luffy cheered excitedly. "Now we need meat to celebrate!"

"It was amazing," Sardonyx said exaggeratedly.

The others stared at the giant woman in shock. Regardless of seeing the two Gems fuse before, they had not gotten used to her appearance. It was far different than the giants on Little Garden and was more unsettling than cute in their eyes. As such, the realization that Crocodile had been defeated had not sunk in for anyone except Usopp (who was too in shock to acknowledge it), Amethyst, Connie, and Greg.

"Steven! You're okay!" Greg wiped more water off of his face.

"How did you beat that hooked guy?!" Connie asked excitedly as the two were gently placed down on Scissors, who was staring up at Sardonyx in awe. "I need to know everything!"

"Wait...IT'S TRUE?!" Damian fell backwards. "You...you defeated Crocodile?!"

"Glad we defected," Genevieve said sarcastically.

"Hold it!" Nami put her foot down. "If you stopped Crocodile, where is he?"

Luffy pointed out towards the desert. "We gave him to Smokey so he could go to jail!"

"YOU DID WHAT?!" Nami freaked out. "What did he do?!"

The pirate shrugged. "Took him to jail? I don't know, we left before anything could happen. Did we find Vivi yet?"

"Yeah, we want to tell her the good news! The war is over!"

"I hate to burst your bubble, but the war hasn't even started," Zoro interjected. "You defeated Crocodile out in the middle of the desert with nobody around to witness it. What needs to be done is stopping

the rest of Baroque Works from egging on the rebellion and then for Vivi's family to settle with them. Our best hope is that Vivi delivered that proof to her father."

"...that was rather thought-out for you," Sanji gave him a dirty look. "Prove that you aren't that okama!"

"...really? At what point could I possibly have been replaced?" Zoro rubbed his temples in irritation. "Do you want me to jump in the water? Because I will, you idiot."

"Which brings us back to our original problem!" Nami steered the conversation back to a semblance of relevancy. "We need to cross the water...fast! Odds are, the rebels and military are going to start fighting any time now regardless of Vivi getting to her father with proof."

"Ah!" Steven put his hands to his mouth. "I just remembered! Codfish said that he called ahead to the bad guys and told them to be on the lookout for Vivi!"

"Shit," Sanji cursed. "Why are we sitting around here twiddling our thumbs?! Get moving, you damn crab!"

"Move?" Sardonyx laughed. "Well I haven't packed my bags, but I have no problem getting my tux wet if you all want a lift across the river! But don't tell the rental place! Oh ho ho ho!"

"Oh yeah!" Luffy shouted to the heavens. "Let's go to Alubarna to get some meat!"

"We have to find Vivi, you dolt!" Usopp reminded him.

"That's right! She probably hasn't eaten either!"

"...do you comprehend anything that is happening?" the liar shook his head.

"LOOK! Dugongs! Hey guys!" Luffy waved to the creatures as Sardonyx passed by them. They raised their flippers up in respect to their Sensei.

"What's that about?" Steven asked.

"Long story."

Upon reaching the shore, Sardonyx let them down and disappeared in a flash of light, leaving Garnet and Pearl in her place. Luffy started clapping at the sight, having never seen a fusion come apart before.

"That was awesome!" Luffy cheered. "I love fusion!"

"Fusion IS awesome," Garnet nodded. "Good teamwork back there."

"Shishishi! It was nothing!"

"So, we need to get to the palace now, right?" Connie asked. "How far away is it?"

The Straw Hats looked at each other and frowned. It dawned on them that without Vivi, they had no idea where they were going. They were relying on Scissors. They turned to Chopper to ask the crab if he knew the way.

"Hold on," Sanji cut the reindeer off. "Is a giant crab really the smartest way to storm a city covertly?"

"He's right," Zoro said. "We'd be sitting ducks. We need a different approach."

"Um...speaking of ducks..." Greg pointed out in the distance.

Like fire spreading across a jungle, a number of creatures sped toward the group. Stopping directly in front of Scissors, seven giant ducks made themselves known. Leading the pack was a most familiar face: Carue.

"Zoro made an unintended joke!" Steven started to laugh as the swordsman's face burned red with embarrassment.

"...can anyone explain exactly what this is?" Pearl asked. "And is that one duck wearing a hat and sunglasses?"

Chopper hopped off of Scissors and began to talk with Carue.



Nodding his head Chopper came back to the group. "Carue said that he is the leader of the Super Spot-Billed Duck Squad, the fastest ducks in the kingdom. They've come to help us get to Alubarna!" However, Chopper's expression hardened. "But they haven't heard anything about Vivi."

"...this is quite possibly the most absurd thing I have witnessed on this trip," Pearl confessed.

"So...what now?" Steven asked.

"I think we need a plan..." Nami thought aloud.

Greg started to count the ducks and the amount of people they had. "We need to deal with the Officer Agents, right? How many did you say there were? Five?"

Petrea nodded. "The 'Mr. 4 Pair,' the 'Mr. 1 Pair,' and Mr. 2."

"Don't forget about Miss Allsunday," Damian added. "She's still out there too."

"Hey! I told you she isn't a bad guy!" Steven protested. "She even saved the two of us back in the desert!"

"What?!" the Straw Hats and Baroque Works members said at once.

"Is he serious?" Petrea asked. "Miss Allsunday is one of the most vicious members of Baroque Works! She was Crocodile's partner..."

"It's true! She saved our lives when we got stabbed and thrown in a quicksand pit! She even rubbed our spit on us!" Luffy confirmed the story.

"Forget about Miss Allsunday for now! I think the best way is to separate the others and try to take them on individually," Garnet said. "We will also need to locate your missing princess in the city. As such, I think we are going to have to make balanced teams and split up."

"Jinkies!" Steven exclaimed.



towards him and, if his eyes were not deceiving him, a pink blur that resembled a large creature. He just stood there as he realized how ridiculous of an entrance it was, but found himself left behind as they sped past him. "Oh, no you don't!" Mr. 1 muttered to himself.

As Mr. 1 ran to catch up with them, he noted how five of the ducks carried two people on them while two of them carried three. The blurry pink creature appeared to be on its own. He wondered exactly what these pirates had planned for them, as he had yet to experience a challenge since he ate his Devil Fruit.

Perhaps today would be the day he broke a sweat when killi...maiming his opponent.

As the ducks diverted themselves in multiple directions, he spotted his partner chasing three ducks carrying two people each going one way while Miss Merry Christmas and her lumbering partner started chasing after the other two ducks containing two people each. 'Do I follow Miss Doublefinger or do I attempt to follow the six remaining ones going into the city?' However, he realized that this was indeed a mission and he should probably follow his partner and assist her before going after the rest.

This at least gave him something to look forward to.

Picking up the pace and entering Alubarna itself, Mr. 1 found himself in a practically deserted street with the lone occupants being his partner and the motley group of pirates. He looked out at his opponents to see who he would try to stop himself from killing: a green-haired man with three swords, a blonde with some kind of headpiece on her forehead, an orange-haired girl, a short purple woman, a balding man with a beard, and the traitor Miss Valentine.

'Child's play.'

# **The Gun Dog And The Bomb Man**

The area outside Alubarna was tense as Garnet sized up the competition. She had been hoping to separate the various Baroque Works members to fight them one at a time, but it seemed like they were bent on staying together as a pair. It didn't necessarily complicate things, but it wasn't as cut and dry as she hoped.

She thought back to how these pirates were having issues fighting Crocodile and began to wonder just how much of this world's history had been altered by their presence here. Would Luffy have defeated Crocodile in the desert? How would they have gotten out of that cage? WOULD they even have been in that cage if not for Steven's ploy?

It was time to find out the measure of the pirates she had signed up to defend.

"Ha ha ha!" Usopp was laughing at the older woman and the lumbering man. "You two are in for it now! Not only do I have 40,000 followers just waiting to spring on you from Alubarna, but we have Garnet with us!"

"That's right, Miss Merry Christmas!" Damian joined in on the laughter. "You are looking at the Gem who could hold her own against Mr. 0 himself! You have absolutely no chance of winning here today!"

"Forgive me for not feeling more scared!" Miss Merry Christmas retorted back. "You're in my world now, not your world! Allow me to show you the powers of the Mole Mole Fruit!"

"Ahhhh!" Usopp screamed. "SHE'S A HIDEOUS MOLE!"

"...she didn't transform yet, man," Damian tried not to laugh.

"Are...are you sure?"

"SHUT UP YOU IDIOT!" Miss Merry Christmas screamed.

In front of their eyes, Miss Merry Christmas' hands turned to claws and her face grew out a snout. Usopp and Chopper backed away in fear, Damian folded his arms, and Garnet was just confused.

"I don't get this world."

"Says the alien who can fuse to form a giant woman!" Usopp countered. "Regardless, we've got this in the bag!"

"Go get them, Garnet!" Chopper cheered.

"Stay back guys! I'll handle this!" Garnet cried theatrically. She summoned her gauntlets and showed them off, much to the awe of her teammates and fear of her opponents.

"Oooooooooohhhhhhhhhh noooooooooo!" Mr. 4 slowly raised his hands up to shield himself.

The Gem warrior punched the ground and the "Mr. 4 Pair" cowered in fear of the attack they were about to deal with. Unfortunately, nothing happened. "Oh no," Garnet said dryly in a flat voice. "My gauntlets. They don't work. What are we going to do."

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN THEY DON'T WORK?!" Damian and Usopp yelled at the same time.

"I don't know," Garnet replied in the same neutral voice. "I'm useless here. It looks like it is up to you, Captain Usopp." She looked over to a bewildered Miss Merry Christmas and the still wincing Mr. 4. "I'm out. I'm just going to watch."

"...what what what?!" Miss Merry Christmas asked in shock. "You...you just give up?"

"Nah, I'm letting my crew handle it," she smiled as she stood by a rock. "I'll just be right here."

"ARE YOU SERIOUS?!"

The older woman just scratched her head with her paw and shrugged. "I mean, the orders are not to kill you...eh, who cares! This thinking is hurting my back! You know what helps? Maiming

idiot pirates!"

The mole woman started to dig a hole in the ground as her partner realized that Garnet wasn't going to hurt him. The other Straw Hats looked to each other and then the sand where Miss Merry Christmas was tunneling and gulped.

"...this is gonna suck," Usopp started shaking his legs.

"...yeah. Yeah it is," Damian nodded. "Still, I've got better things to do today than die, so if it's gonna suck, let's make something of it. Right, Chopper?"

"Right!"

Usopp sighed and adopted a brave face. "Truer words have never been spoken! Have at you!"

Just as he said that, a baseball was shot at the sniper from the side. Seeing it out of the corner of his eye, he jumped out of the way right as it hit the ground, exploding upon impact.

"WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT?!"

Damian looked around for the source of the blast and looked worried. "Damn, I was wondering where he was. I should have seen him coming."

"Seen who?!" Chopper asked, taking his human form much to Garnet's awe.

"Lassoo: Mr. 4's dog!" he pointed over to the source, which was slowly moving toward them.

The dog had light brown fur and a runny nose. However, it was incredibly long and its body looked nothing like a dog and more like a pistol. Usopp, Chopper, and Garnet regarded the creature with bewilderment while Damian kept up his guard.

"That's...that's a dog?" Chopper asked.

"THAT IS NOT A DOG! WHAT THE HELL IS THAT?!" Usopp was

acting hysterical.

"I dunno," Garnet commented from the sidelines. "Looks cute to me."

"Lassoo was Mr. 4's favorite gun before it ate a Devil Fruit and turned into a dachshund," Damian elaborated while picking his nose for potential weapons. "Basically, it's a dog gun that can shoot baseball cannonballs."

"...you're joking, right?" Usopp asked, clearly not buying it. "How does a gun 'eat' a Devil Fruit?" Then he called out to Mr. 4. "HOW DID YOUR GUN EAT A DEVIL FRUIT?! HOW DID AN INANIMATE OBJECT GAIN SENTIENCE?!"

Popping out of the ground right next to Usopp, scaring the pirate to no end, Miss Merry Christmas started to laugh. "Quite simple! It's the newest technology on the Grand Line! Anything can eat a Devil Fruit now!"

"Bullshit!" Usopp argued. "That doesn't make any logical sense!"

"SHUT UP! THE GUN ATE THE FRUIT AND IS NOW A DOG! ACCEPT IT AND MOVE ON!" Miss Merry Christmas started to get angry as she verbally quarreled with Usopp.

As this was happening, Damian took the opportunity to play with his snot with both hands. Understanding that Mr. 4 would take forever to let his partner know that he was using Usopp as a distraction, Damian causally lined up his shot and fired with two hands. "**Nose Fancy Double Cannon!**"

"LISTEN, YOU DUMB PIRATE! ARGUING ABOUT IT IS NOT GOING TO..." Miss Merry Christmas was still ranting as the bomb hit. The mole woman flew directly into Usopp, hitting him with her body and knocking the two of them back.

As she was momentarily stunned, Usopp used the opportunity to open his bag and throw caltrops and other sharp objects all around her. Then he produced a small hammer and started pounding her on the head. "**Usopp Hammer!**"

"Ha!" Garnet let out a single laugh. "Just like *Meat Beat Mania*."

Lassoo, seeing how his master's friend was in danger, started to shoot more baseballs over at Usopp. Chopper, seeing this, turned into his full reindeer and galloped over to the hammer happy liar and scooped him away.

"What? It didn't go off?" Chopper asked after letting Usopp off. It was true. The baseball did not explode upon impact when it hit the ground. Damian walked over and kicked it a few times.

"Hmm...guess it's a dud. Oh well," he shrugged as he went to pick it up. Grabbing the ball, he tried lifting it off the ground, but he soon found out that it was far too heavy to do so. "What the hell? It's as heavy as a cannonball! And...is that ticking?"

"Ugh," a weak voice groaned from next to Damian. It was Miss Merry Christmas, slowly getting up after being pounded in the head. "That's it. I don't care what the orders are: you're dead! Dead! Dead! Let's start with the traitor!"

At that second, the baseball blew up in both Miss Merry Christmas' and Damian's faces. The other three combatants, and one spectator, all looked on in horror.

"Uuuuuuuuuuhhhhhhhhh oooooohhhhhh," Mr. 4 whimpered, clearly fearing the wrath of Miss Merry Christmas when she woke up.

"DAMIAN!" Chopper yelled out. "WE'VE GOT TO HELP HIM!"

However, Usopp hit himself on the head and started to laugh. "Chopper, ye of little faith. Don't you get it? We can't lose this fight."

"What are you saying?"

"The three of us are fighting for more than just a goal. We are fighting for dreams, for redemption, for friends. We won this fight just by being here," Usopp put his hands on his hips and looked out into the sky dramatically. "If their biggest weapon is a dog that shoots cannonballs, then they lost this fight by accepting to challenge us. We don't need electricity in the sand or super strength to beat these guys! We have an even better asset up our sleeves! They have a



gun dog; we have a bomb man!"

From the smoky debris of the baseball cannonball's explosion, Damian walked away unflinchingly and unharmed, picking his nose as if he could care less. He strode over confidently to his companions as the three of them turned to Mr. 4 and his dog, who were now shaking in terror. "I've said it once and I'll say it again: damn I'm good."

The three made their way to the large man holding a baseball bat. As they did so, Damian, without turning around, shot another booger bomb at Miss Merry Christmas to ensure that she stayed down. Sensing danger, Lassoo started to shoot baseballs at his owner, who hit them at the oncoming opponents.

Reaching into his own bag, Chopper shrunk back to his small reindeer form to dodge a baseball. He pulled out a small ball and put it in his mouth. Biting down, the reindeer's eyes widened as he began to concentrate on the attacks. "Usopp, try to swing your hammer and hit one of the baseballs! Damian, Lassoo needs to breathe after firing the baseballs! When that happens, shoot him with your snot then kick him with your bomb kick!"

"Right!" they both yelled back.

Following Chopper's orders, Usopp barely jumped out of the way of the oncoming baseball and struck the object with his trusty hammer. The hammer managed to slightly change the course of one of the baseballs enough that it bounced off of a nearby wall from an old, run down desert temple. It got sent back to Mr. 4, who, being slow, could not react in time to being blown up in the face.

On the downside, due to the weight of the cannonball, Usopp's wrist was shattered immediately.

As with Usopp, Damian followed Chopper's plan perfectly, picking up on the exact moment Lassoo needed to catch his breath and struck the beast down. With that, all three Baroque Works Agents were down for the count.

"Did...did we do it?!" Usopp asked in shock.

"Damn straight we did!" Damian went in for a high five on Usopp's broken wrist, causing him to scream.

"Chopper, explain to me what you just did," Garnet poked the twitching Miss Merry Christmas, punching her once to keep her knocked out.

"Oh, you mean my Rumble Ball? I created it to help strengthen my Devil Fruit powers! I used my 'Scope' ability to determine their weaknesses," Chopper explained.

"That's very interesting, Chopper," Garnet smiled and patted the reindeer on the head. "Good job!"

"Oh shut up, you asshole!" Chopper blushed.

"You seem to be doing better," Usopp's eyes narrowed looking at the Gem. "Okay, what was that about? You could've taken those two on with your eyes closed even without your electrical powers!"

"True," Garnet admitted. "But this wasn't my fight to fight. There is going to be a time where we have to return to Beach City. I wanted to see just how capable you all were. I'm impressed."

"...so you're saying you would have let her kill us if we lost?!" Usopp asked. "What the hell?!"

"I had the utmost confidence in you. Honest," Garnet kept a neutral face. "Let's go find the others."

Chopper pointed to their knocked out opponents and cocked his head. "What about them?"

"I don't think they are going anywhere."

\*AGITR\*

Inside of Alubarna, Luffy, Sanji, Eyelashes, Steven, Connie, and Genevieve found themselves in the middle of an unending battle. All around them people were dying and being shot. It was a horrible place to be but one they needed to be in.

However, this had a profound effect on both Steven and Connie.

This was the first time the two children truly saw and comprehended the casualties of war, although Connie got a glimpse of it back during the Clone Wars. These people were all fighting for their cause and for the same goal: a better and more prosperous Alabasta. Unfortunately, they were blinded by Crocodile's scheming, causing them to fight in a war that could yield no positive outcome.

And it broke their young, innocent hearts.

"We have to help them!" Steven started to direct Carue, the children's personal duck escort, to the heart of the fighting before Luffy stretched over to stop them.

"You can't stop the fighting this way!" Luffy told him. "You would just get yourself killed!"

"But we have to try!" Connie pleaded. "Those people are dying!"

"People die!" Luffy replied sternly. Connie was instantly reminded of her earlier conversation with Pearl and Garnet, causing her to see a somewhat bigger, if not still depressing, picture.

"We'll be able to stop them when we find Princess Vivi," Genevieve reminded them. "Let's keep on task. Carue, do you think that Vivi could be at the palace?"

The duck nodded and pointed its wing toward it. "Then that's where we need to go."

"I think this is the first time I've ever heard you want to keep working!" Luffy joked, trying to raise Steven's spirits as he watched the slaughter around him.

Genevieve, noticing this, forced a smile to try to help keep him distracted. "There's a first time for everything." Then she frowned and looked to Luffy and Sanji. "What about you two?"

"I guess we will search around for that shitty okama bastard...and yes, I know: 'cursing!'" Sanji lit a cigarette and looked around for any sign of him. "He wasn't with the others like we planned."

"Don't worry guys, we'll find him!" Luffy reassured them. He closed his eyes and gave a large smile. "We'll save Vivi's people for sure! Are you two going to be okay?"

Connie gave a light nod and nudged Steven in the arm. He wiped away a few tears and forced himself to nod. "As okay as we are going to be."

"That's the spirit, Steven! Let's go that way duck guy!" He pointed toward a giant building in the west.

The duck carrying two Straw Hats and a camel sped off as Carue carried the children to the palace. Unfortunately, the path involved seeing even more death and destruction, causing Steven to shut his eyes furiously.

"Just make it stop," he whispered. "Just make it stop. Just make it stop."

He did not know how to comprehend the action happening around him. He had been prepared to put his own life on the line to prevent this, but the actual fighting seemed surreal to him. Steven had naturally assumed that they would save the day well before any fighting on this scale could break out. It was one thing if it was good guys against bad guys, but this was something else entirely.

There was no good and evil. There was only death and pain.

"We will never make it to the palace in one piece with all of this fighting going on," Genevieve searched around at the carnage and grimaced. "Carue, is there a faster way to get there?"

He nodded viciously and altered his course away from the majority of the fighting and headed towards a small street leading into a tunnel. "What? What is this?" Genevieve asked.

"I think it's a secret passage," Connie finally smiled. "That's cool! Right, Steven?"

He didn't respond, still spacing out after looking at the bloodied members of the rebel and royal forces. Finally, Connie grabbed him and shook him. "Steven, listen to me! It's just like Luffy said: people

die! I don't like it either, but Garnet and Pearl told me that it will happen no matter what! We need to accept it and move on!"

"What?!" Steven asked.

"These people aren't going to listen to a few children while a civil war is going on! They don't even know us! We can't do anything but find the princess, right?" Connie reminded him. "If we find her, maybe then can we help her stop the fighting! But we can't find her if you are sad and unfocused! We need the happy, cheerful Steven who loves to sing and smile! Do you understand?"

Genevieve listened on as the girl made her surprisingly mature plea to Steven. She was not that good at reading people, but even Genevieve could pick up on how disturbed Connie was when she saw the bloodshed. Yet, now she was taking charge of a situation that she barely understood in a world that she had barely been in. The fact she was keeping herself together so well was a testament to her character.

Genevieve was impressed. She really could see why Steven liked her.

"...I..." Steven sniffed. "I get it. Are...we are going to save the people, right?"

"Well duh!" Connie smiled. "Don't you always save the day?"

"Yeah," he returned it, finding some small semblance of inspiration in her words. "Yes, I do!"

Suddenly, Carue halted himself in the middle of the tunnel and started to quack, bringing the three children's attention back to the present moment. They were not alone in the tunnel. Blocking their way was a man on horseback. He had blond hair and purple-tinted glasses. Genevieve noted that in addition the sword he was holding, the man also had a scar running down his eye, making him look formidable.

"What are you kids doing here?!" he called to them in a panic. "Get out of here! This is no place for children!"

"Who even are you?" Genevieve asked.

"That doesn't matter! You kids need to find somewhere safe and hide!" he pleaded to them.

"Aren't we safe in here?" Connie countered. "Maybe we aren't safe from you!"

He removed his glasses and rubbed his temples. Finally he sighed and brought his horse closer to them. "I'm Kohza. Don't worry I'm not going to hurt you. I'm here to force the king to surrender and end this destructive conflict."

"That means you're the leader of the rebellion," Genevieve realized.

Kohza nodded before narrowing his eyes. "Carue? How do you know Carue? Who are you kids?"

The painter thought about it and nodded to Steven and Connie, who encouraged her to continue. "How much time do you have?"

# The First Rule Of Assassination

"It's about time you got here." Miss Doublefinger sighed as her partner showed up. "I told you to be patient."

Mr. 1 had just made himself known in the abandoned Alubarna street. With their ducks now safely away, Zoro, Pearl, Amethyst, Greg, Petrea, and Nami now stood alone against the most deadly pair of killers Baroque Works had to its name. The man with the shaved head grumbled something and looked over his opponents, causing Greg and Nami to inch back slightly.

"Paula, we really don't need to do this!" Petrea pleaded to her former companion. "There's no point in fighting! Crocodile was defeated not even two hours ago!"

"Really?" Miss Doublefinger asked sarcastically. "That's the best you got, Miss Valentine? Do you honestly expect me to believe that your ragtag band of pirates here took down a Shishibukai by themselves?"

"But it's true, Baroque Works person!" Pearl stepped forward while keeping her eyes on Mr. 1. "We took down your boss in the desert and then handed him over to the Marine! See for yourself!"

She touched her forehead and allowed the group to witness the defeat of Crocodile first hand, from Sardonyx's entrance to the fight on to dropping him off on Smoker's ship. It was the first time the Straw Hats saw the duel and witnessed a fusion in action. Greg, however, almost choked on his own spit when he saw his son's fusion.

"Gah! That's what Steven looks like fused with that Monkey guy?" He sniffled a bit. "My little man's growing up!"

The two Officer Agents, however, did not seem to accept Pearl's explanation despite seeing the action play out in front of them. Miss Doublefinger took a long drag of her pipe and sighed. "I'm sorry honey, but I'm not buying it. Where were you when you captured this fight on...on whatever that is on your forehead?"

"My gem," Pearl corrected, shutting off the footage. "This would be my gem. But I was half of Sardonyx, that giant warrior with the laugh. You know 'ho ho ho!'" Pearl tried to weakly imitate her fused form, causing Greg and Amethyst to start laughing.

"...half?" Paula shook her head. "I don't follow. Actually, you know what? I don't care. We already received our orders from Miss Allsunday, who I'm sure would have told us if Crocodile was captured by this point."

"Miss Allsunday?" Nami, who was now further down the alley away from the others, called to them. "What did she say?"

"We'll tell you when you are bleeding out at our feet, okay?" Paula gave a false, cheerful smile.

She started to walk towards them, with the others keeping their guards up. However, Paula walked right by the group and stopped at Greg, who was doing what he could not to shake in fear. "Hello, darling. You seem nervous."

"Um...hello yourself, scary blue-haired lady?" Greg gave a weak wave. "I...I don't suppose you just want to talk?"

"First rule of assassination, darling," she smiled. "Target the weak links first."

Reaching to his side, Greg pulled out his lightsaber and ignited the blade, causing Miss Doublefinger to step back slightly in shock, which turned to interest. "Stay...stay back! I have a lightsaber and I know how to use it! It can even cut your sea foam cage things, so don't think about messing with me!"

The woman let out a light chuckle and waved her finger. "That doesn't seem fair to me. Guess I'll have to shift the odds in my favor, okay?" She then pointed her finger right at the hilt of the blade and extended it into a needle, piercing the weapon and causing it to shut down.

Greg looked down at his sword, pressed the ignition button a few times and gulped. "...I'm totally useless now, aren't I?"



She nodded and blew smoke right into his face. "Seems like it."

"...and you can probably kill me with your finger, can't you?"

"Sure can."

"Ah," he nodded. "Well it was nice meeting you. Good luck, Gems and pirates! I think I hear Steven calling. Exit, stage right!" With that he ran straight towards Nami, who got the message and ran for her life with him.

"What a lovely bunch you are traveling with now, Miss Valentine," Paula called as she continued after them. "I can't wait to get to know them better!"

"GREG!" Pearl called out in shock. She went to stop her, but Amethyst was already on it. She summoned her whip and lassoed it around the Baroque Works woman, who was caught off-guard.

"What's this?" she asked. But before she could react, Amethyst threw her through several buildings, looking surprised at the strength of her action.

"Whoops. Too hard?" Amethyst asked to the others. However, Petrea held tightly to her parasol and jumped up.

"Not hard enough to take down someone as powerful as she has to be. Come on!" Petrea directed her floating to the area where Paula got thrown to. "Nami! Greg! If you can't fight then get out of here! We'll cover you!"

"I don't think so," Mr. 1 responded as he made a lunge to follow the two Straw Hat allies, but found himself blocked by Pearl's staff and Zoro's sword. Amazingly, though his attack was stopped, the pillar behind him started to fall apart, sliced vertically in four perfect pieces.

"How did that just happen?!" Nami asked from the sideline.

"Isn't it obvious?" Zoro smirked. "He's eaten a Devil Fruit. Go on. Get out of here!"

"You don't have to tell us twice!" Greg said, grabbing Nami's hand and running away from the three of them.

"Devil Fruits again, eh?" Pearl smirked and tried to hide her excitement. "These things are beginning to fascinate me! Tell me, criminal...how did you do that?"

Saying nothing, Mr. 1 merely slashed down his arm, forcing Zoro to meet it with his sword. Before their eyes, Pearl and Zoro witnessed his arm turn into a sharp blade, stopping the attack with no damage or alarm.

"I ate the Dice Dice Fruit," Mr. 1 elaborated. "I can produce steel blades anywhere along my body. It's unfortunate for you two, since I've never been injured since eating it. A pity."

However, Mr. 1 kept looking at Zoro until his eyes widened. "Ah, now I've figured out who you are: the great 'Pirate Hunter' Roronoa Zoro. You're the one who took down the Millions in Whiskey Peak...and killed the former Mr. 7 when he asked you to join us."

"...'killed?'" Pearl asked, clearly not approving of Zoro's past.

Sensing this, Zoro elaborated. "It was a long time ago. It's not like he gave me much of a choice. I told him I'd join your stupid group only if I could be the leader. He didn't like what I had to say, and I didn't like him trying to kill me."

The green-haired swordsman began to chuckle. "Tell you what, I'll give you the same offer, Mr. 1. You all are presently without a leader and I seem to already have three of your number on my side already. Why don't you come work for me?"

"Hrmph," Mr. 1 grunted. "I'd rather duel you to the death."

"That can be arranged."

Mr. 1 started cracking each of his knuckles and moved menacingly toward the former pirate hunter. Zoro, eagerly awaited him, but found that his new Gem partner still wished to give him one final chance not to fight.

"You will go no further, criminal!" Pearl declared as she stepped in front of Zoro. "If you will not yield from your criminal ways, you will be forced to submit to our might!"

"...submit to our might?" Zoro asked. "Really?"

"You can do better?" Pearl raised an eyebrow. "Be my guest, Zoro."

"I was doing fine on my own!" Zoro argued.

Wasting no time, Mr. 1 karate chopped Pearl, assuming she was the weaker link of the two. Unfortunately for him, Pearl met the attack while still bantering with Zoro, keeping her cool and batting it away with an air of grace.

"Clearly not if he is still attacking," Pearl sighed, barely registering the attack. "I suppose he's left us no choice."

"...you..." Mr. 1 regarded her with admiration and anger, staring down at his own bladed hand and smiled. "I think I'm going to have fun with this."

\*AGITR\*

Nami and Greg continued to run for their lives until Greg realized he could run no more. Gasping and wheezing, the man directed the two of them in an abandoned building to give themselves a moment to catch up and reflect their current situation.

"So let's back this up: a woman who can turn her body into spikes and a man who can turn his body into steel knives are presently trying to kill us," Greg panted. "And we are being targeted because we are the weak ones?!"

"Greg, we need to calm down and focus!" Nami tried to appeal to him. "Yes, we might not be the heavy hitters on our teams, but we need to show them that we can hold our own."

"...did you not see the scary lady ruin my only chance of being useful?"

Nami frowned. "I'm sure you can be useful beyond some kind of

alien weapon, Greg."

"I know music! I know how to fix cars! My skill set doesn't particularly lend itself well to fighting!" Greg bemoaned. He started to pace around frantically. "This thing was my only chance to actually be a help to the Gems...to my son! Do you think I like being the load? I feel like the girlfriend in *Back to the Future*, who has to get knocked out because the writers had no idea what to do with her since she offered nothing to the plot!"

"...what?"

"What I'm trying to say is...I'm afraid, man. I'm afraid that I'm going to let them all down...that I'll lose him again right after I just got him back..." Greg slumped on a nearby wall, staring at his now broken weapon. "Bet I sound pathetic, don't I?"

Nami joined him on the wall and put her hand on his shoulder and clapped it. "You're not the only one. I'm the brains of this crew, not the brawn. These guys are way out of my league, but you know what? I realized that if I was going to do this, I would have to learn to depend on myself to do the right thing. Do you realize what we are doing?"

"Running away and hoping the others will take care of it?"

"Exactly. All of these people, all of our friends, you son...they are all fighting and suffering to bring about what they believe in...and here we are running away. It forces me to remember why I'm doing this and what I believe in. Do you know what I believe in?" Nami asked, smiling. "I believe in you, Greg!"

"Me?" Greg asked. "Why the heck would you believe in me? You haven't even known me longer than a day!"

"But you made the choice to go after Steven," the navigator pointed out. "You made the choice to save us from Crocodile, even though it put you in the line of fire, and made the choice to come out here and take on Baroque Works with us!"

"...I did, didn't I?" Greg found the strength to chuckle. He stared

down once more at the damaged hilt and gripped it tightly. "Still...we need some kind of pla...what are you fiddling with?"

Nami had pulled out a piece of paper and three blue rods from her desert outfit. She began to stare at the paper and back to the rods as if following a puzzle. "This? This is my Clima Tact. I had Usopp make it for me when we had some downtime on the ship. I told him that I wanted to be a contributing member of the party, so he came up with this to give me a fighting edge. Now I just need to figure out how it works."

"No kidding! Mind if I take a peek at the instructions? I'm pretty good at this kind of stuff," Greg offered as Nami handed it over to him.

The man started to read Usopp's notes and started to frown. Finally, after a long moment, the color drained from his face and he regarded his new companion. "...you told Usopp that you wanted to be a contributing member of the party, right?"

Nami nodded. "Yeah...why?"

"You used those exact words?"

"...Greg, I don't like where this is going..."

He sighed and pointed to several passages in the instructions. "I think he took the part about a 'party' a bit differently than you were hoping."

"What?! What the hell does that mean?! I..." Nami started to get angry before snatching the instructions out from the elder Universe's hands. Her eyes followed the piece of paper until she hit the part Greg was referring to. She was no longer angry.

She was livid.

"USOPP!"

She started to configure the weapon in various positions, first causing pigeons to fly out from it and then a bouquet of flowers. As this was going on, Greg continued to stare at the lightsaber, trying to think of a way to use the tool to his advantage. "This is hopeless!"

Half of this instruction manual is just party tricks! How am I supposed to use this in battle?!"

"For what it's worth, I believe in you Nami," Greg gave a weak smile. "Maybe you need to get to the heart of the weapons. Check each individual comp..."

The man stopped his thought mid-sentence and widened his eyes. "Holy mackerel, I think I've got something!"

"What? A use for this damn staff?" Nami continued to read the instruction's backside, reaching the section titled *Usopp Bubbles: For When You Want To Liven Up Your Party The Cool Way*.

"No! I need a screwdriver or something to get this thing open!" Greg pointed to the lightsaber. "I was going to give this to Steven for his birthday in a few weeks, but this is more important! Help me look through these houses; this might just be it!"

"What are you talking about?" Nami was not following along at all.

Greg merely smirked. "I think Miss Doublefinger wasn't as cracked up as she thought she was, because her last attack is gonna blow in her face!"

"...I don't follow."

"Just roll with the puns, Nami," Greg started to search house after abandoned house. "It will all make sense in time!"

\*AGITR\*

Mr. 1 was actually feeling an emotion: excitement.

Since eating his Devil Fruit, he had been offered no real challenges from any of his opponents. He killed and maimed for a living and, while that was a good way to relieve stress, after a while it stops being interesting. The closest thing that compared was the fun game of guessing if his target would run or stand their ground.

Yet, here were two people who dared to challenge him with such conviction that it caused Mr. 1 to reevaluate his initial thoughts on

them. Upon realizing Zoro's identity, he figured he would be an interesting fight, but a short one regardless. The girl was the wildcard. He had underestimated her but once and she had managed to swat him away like he were a cat toy.

He would not do so again.

Turning his leg into a blade, Mr. 1 slashed down on Zoro, who met the attack with both of his swords. Wasting no time, he jumped backwards and went for a low strike, forcing Zoro to focus on deflecting kick after kick.

"You can't keep this up forever," Mr. 1 was telling him.

"You can't either!" Zoro grinned.

Switching tactics, Mr. 1 turned his each of his fingers and palms into knives and started to scratch at him, keeping Zoro continuously moving. As this was happening, the woman was standing by, watching the action and commenting on it, further annoying the Baroque Works assassin.

"Zoro, keep your right arm straight! When you are able to, aim a swift forward slash! That will allow you to maintain good footing while giving you the propulsion needed to strike!" she critiqued.

"IS THIS REALLY THE TIME TO..." Zoro started to complain before Mr. 1 attempted to knee him, making Zoro jump and roll away. The swordsman readopted his stance and proceeded to grab his third sword and put it in his mouth.

"What?" the Gem gasped. "The third sword wasn't just for show?! What could you possibly do with three swords?"

"**Oni...**" Zoro started as he ran towards Mr. 1, who looked surprised at the oncoming assault. "**Giri!**"

The assassin flew into the air and hit the ground hard. For a split second, Mr. 1 had thought he was about to be hurt. As usual, the attack did nothing but hold him back.

"I have never seen anyone fight with three blades before!" the Gem

was saying as Mr. 1 started to get up. "The immense dedication to training your jaw must have been...well it's more than I have expected from a human! I...oh no."

"I don't get it," Zoro shook his head, clearly shocked at the sight of the unharmed Mr. 1. "You don't have a scratch on you...nobody has ever withstood my 'Oni-Giri' attack!"

"You haven't fought me. I already told you, my Devil Fruit power makes me invincible. In order to cut me, you would have to learn to cut steel itself," Mr. 1 boasted. "So go ahead, cut me already."

Mr. 1 started up his kicks again, focusing on Zoro once more as the woman studied his techniques in awe. The swordsman was indeed doing an admirable job of blocking his moves, but it was time to end it. The man opened up his palms and pushed them out at Zoro, who caught them with his swords. **"Sparkling Daisy."**

As with the pillar before, the building behind Zoro started to slice in equal portions. The swordsman knew that he was done for, and Mr. 1 took little pleasure in what he was about to do. "Blow away."

Zoro proceeded to fly directly into the wreckage, crashing into hard debris that now crumbled on top of his bleeding body. Mr. 1 assumed that he could easily get out of there, but he knew that he had struck a deadly blow to his morale.

"Zoro!" Pearl called out. "ZORO!"

"Let him be, woman," Mr. 1 sauntered over to her. "He needs time to lick his wounds like the dog he is. You've been on the sidelines for too long. Show me your moves."

The woman's forehead started to flow and a second staff appeared that was identical to the one in her hand. She twirled them around a bit and bowed to him. "Gladly. And the name is Pearl, 'Mr. 1!'"

"Good to know," Mr. 1 allowed her to make the first strike, anxious to see if his feelings about her were correct.

She would be the one to give him a challenge. He knew it.



\*AGITR\*

As Mr. 1 was fighting Zoro, another fight was taking place further down the Alubarnan streets. Unfortunately for the Straw Hats and Gems, it was faring just as well as that fight. Specifically, it wasn't faring well at all.

As Petrea's powers were geared toward physical contact, any attempt to strike Miss Doublefinger would be just as painful as the blow she was dealing out. Bruises covered her body as she took the worst of what Paula dished out. However, this did not stop her from fighting her former coworker.

She was also not fighting alone. Amethyst was fighting just as hard as her, but Petrea noted that her body could take a lot more damage than it let on. Stab after stab, Amethyst was not going down.

"You just don't quit don't you?" Miss Doublefinger asked, both impressed and irritated.

"I can keep going all day, baby!" Amethyst laughed. She started to roll herself incredibly fast and went to strike the Baroque Works with her spin dash. However, she was ready for such an attack.

**"Stinger Hedgehog!"** Paula cried as she rolled up into a ball and began to roll directly into Amethyst's oncoming attack. As she rolled, spikes grew out of every part of her body, ready to stab the Gem.

The two near identical attacks struck each other at the same time. Though Paula was hit by Amethyst's superior speed and energy, her spikes managed to dig themselves into purple woman's skin, causing major damage to her physical form.

Finally, Amethyst staggered back and clutched her body. The Gem started to cough and gave a weak thumbs up to Petrea. "You've got this!" With a laugh, her body burst into smoke. The purple gemstone in her chest started to spin on the floor, leaving Petrea in tears and Miss Doublefinger returned to her natural state.

"AMETHYST! NO!" the blonde wailed out as she watched the gemstone finally stop moving.

"Well, I wasn't expecting that," Paula chuckled. She raised her foot up and prepared to crush the last remains of Amethyst under her heels.

**"10,000 Kilo Kick!"** Petrea yelled as she kicked Paula in the stomach. Just as she connected her blow, Paula created a spike that penetrated her foot cleanly, causing the former Miss Valentine to scream. She fell to the floor and dropped her parasol.

"Ugh," Miss Doublefinger rubbed the wounded area and wiped the blood off of it. "You might have cracked a rib there, Valentine, but at what cost? Your foot is practically useless now. Do you know what that means? It means you're going to die."

Petrea continued to clutch her foot as she started to reach for her parasol. 'If I can reach that, I can float away and...'

"Aw, you want this, don't you?" Miss Doublefinger walked up to it exaggeratedly and kicked the parasol further out of reach. Petrea's face whitened as she realized that she was done for. "I don't get it, hun. Why throw away your life so recklessly? Don't you know you'll end up like that purple woman: dead?"

"I'd rather die...than forsake any of them. They trusted me...and I'm not about to betray that. Amethyst died protecting...protecting these people...and she didn't even know them!" Petrea winced as she tried to get up. Unfortunately, Paula merely stabbed her other ankle, keeping her grounded. "AHH! No matter how many times you can stab me...it doesn't compare to the pain I helped inflict on this country."

"You picked a lousy time to get a conscious," Miss Doublefinger sighed. "Oh well. You're just lucky the orders aren't to kill you...still, I can do a lot more without killing you."

"Stop it!" a male voice yelled from the end of the street. Petrea forced herself to keep her eyes open as she saw the outlines of Greg and Nami made themselves known. Greg was clutching his broken laser sword and Nami was doing the same with the staff Usopp made for her.

"Darling, I was wondering where you went," Paula was surprised. "And look, you brought the cutie too. How adorable. I'm a little busy at the moment, but if you give me a second, I'll be right with you."

"No...run...!" Petrea pleaded. "She...killed...Am...Amethyst!"

"What?!" Greg scanned the street and saw Amethyst's gemstone and frowned. "No she didn't!"

"What?" Paula whipped around and stared at the rock. "She's clearly just a rock now!"

"Like this one?!" Greg yelled as he threw a crystal looking object at her with all his might.

The blue-haired woman sighed and shook her head. "A rock. Really?" She pointed her finger to stab the little rock before it hit her. "You've lost it, haven't you?"

The second her spiked finger penetrated the crystal, it exploded, kicking up a dust cloud and causing Paula to cry out in unspeakable pain. "AHHH! My hand!"

"What you just stabbed was a kaiburr crystal: the heart of a lightsaber," Greg explained before the smoke cleared, seemingly terrified, concerned, and confident at the same time. "I never could have gotten it, but you exposed the thing when you damaged the hilt earlier."

"You...you...!" Paula roared in anger. The smoke cleared and Greg witnessed the full extent of the damage he just caused: Paula's hand was extremely damaged and burned, her other good hand clutching the remains of the limb. His eyes grew wide and he started to stutter.

"Ahh! I wasn't expecting it...I mean I...I didn't know it would destroy your hand! I just wanted you to pass out or something! I never...I...what is with lightsabers and hands?!"

Paula, ignoring Greg's cries of forgiveness, went to lunge at the man, but found herself instead facing Nami, who pointed her weapon right at her. Two of the rods were stacked on each other

while the third was placed on top, resembling an uppercase "T."

"Get out of my way girlie!" Miss Doublefinger demanded, fighting through the pain to turn her good hand into a long blade.

"I don't think so. Didn't you hear? We've got a tornado warning in effect!" Nami smirked as she pressed her weapon. **"Tornado Tempo!"** Two mechanical birds appeared and started to fly around Paula's arms, tying themselves around them.

"What is this?!" Paula cried before the top of the staff started to twirl around, taking the Baroque Works operative with her. Finally, Nami kept her aim steady as she fired the woman into the wall, causing her to fly through a set of buildings once more.

"Give...give me the par...osal!" Petrea asked Greg, who was still freaking out over the damage he caused another human being.

"Gah! I mean...what? Why do you need this?" Greg was curious but nevertheless knew not to argue with a woman in her condition.

Clutching the object, Petrea floated in the air, barely keeping a solid grip on the curved handle. As she floated above the still form of Paula, she shifted her weight and crashed on top of her, knocking the woman out once and for all.

"That...that was for Amethyst," Petrea smiled before passing out herself.

Greg and Nami ran over to collect the woman, leaving Miss Doublefinger on the ground, alone and broken. "This looks bad," Nami frowned. "We need to get her bandaged up fast. Chopper should be near the main gate."

"Hold on, I need to get Amethyst!" Greg searched the debris until he pulled out the purple gemstone. He examined it and sighed. "Oh thank goodness; it's not cracked."

"Is...is she...?" Nami asked, trying to pick up Petrea. Greg handed her the stone as he bent down and picked her up himself.

"She'll be fine. When Gems get too damaged, they retreat into their

gemstone to heal. Give her some time and our Purple Puma will be back to her old self," he forced himself to chuckle.

The man gave one final look at his fallen opponent and followed Nami. Paula's fallen form was still and lifeless, but miraculously she was still alive. Greg considered it a small miracle, but then again he didn't know much about fighting. He didn't feel right about his actions, but he knew that they were necessary to save the people he cared about.

Hopefully Pearl and Zoro were holding up as well. He didn't want to abandon the area, but Petrea's life depended on it.

\*AGITR\*

Pearl was barely holding her own against Mr. 1.

The man had created several spinning blades on his arms, which not only functioned as a weapon but also as a way to defend his chest. The blades turned faster as faster, causing even her own magical spears to merely connect as oppose to slicing through to her target. Regardless of Pearl being able to cut steel or not, Mr. 1 was not allowing her any chance to get that to happen.

"You rely too much on your abilities!" Pearl taunted. "Fighting is more than spinning blades and tricks! It is about knowing your weapon: being your weapon!"

She went in for a double staffed strike, but had her weapons swatted away by the assassin, preparing his hands to drill directly into Pearl's chest.

"You forget: I AM my weapon," he growled.

Just as Mr. 1 struck Pearl, Zoro managed to free himself from the rubble and pushed the Gem away, taking the full assault himself. Pearl looked mortified as the blades tore open his chest and sprayed blood all over the ground, losing all of his swords in the process.

"You should have stayed down," Mr. 1 told him.

"There's...no honor in that," he smiled before collapsing.

Pearl walked over and checked Zoro's pulse, confirming that he was still alive. The Gem's face contorted in anger and created three new staffs, putting the third one in her mouth like her fallen comrade.

"What's this? A pathetic show of respect?"

"This is a showing of unity and pride!" Pearl spat out. "My comrade may be down, but you are dealing with a Crystal Gem! You lost just by accepting to fight!"

"Funny; you didn't land a single blow on me," Mr. 1 reminded her. "You've yet to show me that there is any offensive skill behind your boasting."

As he was speaking, Pearl moved faster than she did before. Struggling to use the third staff, it was rough at first until she found her rhythm. Mr. 1 was now on the defensive, swatting away the newly formed weapons and being forced back until one of the grazed his cheek.

He started to bleed.

"WHAT?!" He could not stop his blocking or else he would have felt the blood dripping from the small cut. "Nobody has ever cut me before..."

"You haven't fought a Crystal Gem," Pearl smirked. "A true swordsman can feel the breath of the steel...the breath of everything around them. I..."

"That...that's what this is then?" a weak voice managed to get out as the two fighters stopped and regarded its source. Zoro, despite losing more blood than humanly possible, had managed to stumble towards the two clutching one of his discarded swords. "I can hear it...the breath of all things."

"How are you still alive?!" Mr. 1 started to lose composure. "Why won't you die?!"

"Zoro! Stay down!" Pearl commanded.

"I'm ending this!" Mr. 1 spat, kicking away the Gem and running towards the warrior. Zoro, however, held himself together and held onto his sheath.

**"Single Sword..."** Zoro said as he unsheathed his sword, swiped it at Mr. 1's chest and resheathed it back. **"...Lion's Strike!"**

A burst of blood erupted out of Mr. 1's chest. The man looked shocked, as not only had he not bled at all until that day, but here he was getting cut twice in one day. "You...you...what's next? Slicing diamonds?" he laughed, coughing up more blood. "I accept my defeat...thank you...for a good fight!" He used his last energy to chuckle, collapsing in a pool in his own blood.

"Thank you...for being a worthy opponent," Zoro took a knee himself, being caught by Pearl.

"What do you think you were doing?! You've lost too much blood! You could have been killed!" Pearl started to fret over her companion.

"None...none of that matters...because I am a man who cut steel!"

# The Fake King of Alabasta

Tashigi was a wreck.

As her and the other Marines made it into Alubarna, they had walked right into a full blown civil war, making it hard to determine where Crocodile and his men might have gone. There was no chatter on the Black Den Den Mushi either, showing that the pirates either turned off or tossed away the communication device. As such, it was up to Tashigi to use her skills to locate the Shishibukai.

Fortune shined down on her when she noticed the eternally wanted criminal Nico Robin leading King Nefeltari Cobra down the streets toward the west entrance of this city. They had tried to stop her, but Nico Robin merely played around with them. That is, until one of Tashigi's men recognized her and recalled the crimes that caused her to be wanted by the government at the age of eight.

Then she stopped playing around and truly wounded the officers of the law, leaving Tashigi a broken bloody mess on the ground.

She had done everything in her power to get her to stop, but the woman merely created hands from the ground and choked her into submission. It was a humiliating experience for the young Marine, but she refused to quit. She would save this country and she would do it by the book. There was no way she would allow pirates to help the Marines do their jobs.

"What?! It's that Marine!" a familiar voice yelled out.

"TASHIGI?! HOW DARE SOMEONE DO THIS TO A BEAUTIFUL YOUNG WOMAN?!" a second voice added to it.

Just as Tashigi struggled to remember where she heard that voice before, the man in question came into view: Monkey D. Luffy. By his side was the blond-haired cook she had seen briefly at Logue Town.

"...you..." Tashigi managed to get out.

"Do you need help?" Luffy asked, hopping off a duck to lend her a



hand. "What happened?!"

"I'm fine!" she snapped. "Nico...Nico Robin took...the king!"

"Vivi's dad?!" Luffy was shocked and concerned. "Where are they? What direction did they go?!"

Tashigi thought about it for a moment. Her sense of Justice always told her that pirates were always scum. There was no in-between. Yet, here her hated enemy was, checking on her and now showing interest in saving the king. Why was everything today turning upside down?

In the end, she knew what she had to do, though she didn't like it.

"She...she went that way," Tashigi pointed towards the Royal Temple in the distance.

Luffy nodded and then gave her a concerned look. "Are you sure that you don't want help?"

"Get out of here before I arrest you!" Tashigi ordered him. "I said I'll be fine!"

Luffy frowned but then broke into a ridiculous grin. "I'm gonna go rescue the king! If you're still here when I get back, I'm gonna help you whether you like it or not!"

With that, the two pirates remounted their duck, though Luffy seemed to have to force the blond man to follow his lead, and then they raced toward the Royal Temple. The sight continued to perplex Tashigi as she began to reevaluate her sense of Justice and her commitment to duty. Though she hated to admit it, she might have had the wrong idea about these pirates. Yes, they were terrible people who should be thrown in jail, but it was becoming clearer that maybe there were cases where these people were on her side.

Perhaps there were times that it was okay to look the other way in order to maintain the peace.

\*AGITR\*

"So you're telling me that everything that we have been fighting for...that we have been dying for...has been orchestrated by Crocodile this entire time?" Kohza asked. "You paint a tough picture to follow."

Genevieve had been explaining to Kohza for roughly ten minutes the exact circumstances and details behind Crocodile's plan, her part in said plans, her defection, and Vivi's part in everything. Unfortunately, it did not seem as if he was buying her story.

Steven caught himself about to chuckle at Kohza's unintentional pun, realizing this was a time to remain serious but not depressed. "It's true, Mr. Kohza! Look," Steven pointed to his wrist. "Vivi recorded everything that codfish...I mean Crocodile said when we confronted him! She has the other one of these and went to find her father!"

Kohza stared at the device and frowned. "If what you are saying is true...then all of this has been for nothing." He curled his hands into fists. "There is only one way to find out!"

He continued on toward the palace, leaving the children and the duck behind. They hopped on Carue and sped up to follow him, hoping to settle this once and for all. After a short time, they found themselves in a grassy area right outside of the palace. The door was already open, showing the trio that Kohza was a few steps ahead of them.

"I've got a bad feeling about this," Connie frowned. "That Kohza guy did not look like he was the kind of person to ask questions first..."

"Then we have to find Vivi first!" Steven put his hands together and tried to crack them. "Ow!"

"Do we even know for a fact Vivi is in the palace?" Genevieve asked. "I mean, Kohza didn't seem to notice her, which shows she might have gone unnoticed by the rebels, but what's there to say that she's not with the royal army or captured by other Baroque Works Agents?"

"Instinct," Steven replied, moving toward the door before stopping.

"Carue, can you lead the way to the throne room?"

The duck nodded and led the way inside of the palace, with the three young ones following along, taking in the sights of an actual royal palace and, in the case of Genevieve, looking for people hiding around any corner. She was expecting some kind of resistance from her former life and, despite not having the necessary tools to do much, she would be glad to put them in their place.

"I feel like I'm in a fairy tale," Connie pointed out. "This palace is beautiful!"

"Yeah. Vivi has a nice house," Steven agreed. "How much farther, Carue?"

Motioning down the hallway, the group hurried as fast as they could. As they continued further and further down the corridor, they could pick up a familiar, and very irritated, voice echoing off the walls.

"How do I know you're the real Cobra?!" the voice was shouting.

"Kohza, listen to me. I can guarantee you that I'm the real king," a new voice responded. "Do you need me to tell you about your youth with my daughter and the Sand Sand Clan?"

"I..." Kohza grew quiet. By this point, they were about to enter the throne room, but were holding back at Genevieve's request.

"Let's see how this plays out," she whispered. The two dimensionally displaced youths nodded and listened intently on the conversation.

"Everyone knows about my past!" Kohza finally announced. "I want you to tell me something that only you, me, and Vivi know. What was my nickname for you when I was a kid?"

There was silence as the king presumably thought of his answer. Finally, he sighed and began to speak. "Do you mean besides 'Vivi's dad?' Your father used to get so angry..."

Kohza started to laugh, cutting him off. "I'll be damned. I was such a fool...such an idiot..."

"What are you saying?" he asked.

"I called King Cobra 'Nebra,' you asshole! I shortened Nefeltari and Cobra together to sound cool!" Kohza yelled. "The kids were right! We've been set up by Crocodile...by you!"

"This isn't going to be good!" Genevieve whispered harshly. "It's Mr. 2!"

"Who?" Connie asked.

Steven continued to frown before making his decision. "I'll handle this!"

"What?" Genevieve asked. "What does that even mean? We are going in together!"

"I know," he nodded. "But let's try to stop this without someone getting hurt!"

The three of them and Carue burst in the room just as Kohza pulled out his weapon. The fake king put a hand to his face, revealing his identity as Mr. 2, and kicked it away from the rebel leader. He prepared to strike the man with a karate chop, but Steven got there first, creating a shield to deflect the hit.

"What?! Tiger Millionaire?!" Mr. 2 gasped exaggeratedly. "I thought Zero-chan took care of you!"

"The reports of my demise have been greatly exaggerated," Steven said, recalling back movie one liners and clichés. "Mr. 2, we don't need to do this! Crocodile has been captured by the Marines! Stop pretending to be the king and tell everyone the truth!"

"Why should I believe you, Tiger Millionaire? You lied to me!" Mr. 2 stared Steven in the eye, legitimately hurt. "You told me we were friends! We laughed together! We danced together!"

"I only lied to you about being a bounty hunter," Steven pointed out. "I never lied to you about being your friend."

The okama blinked and stared at the boy in awe. "...what?"

"You are a good guy, Mr. 2! I know everyone joined Baroque Works to follow their dreams! As one friend to another, what is your dream?"

"...friend?" Mr. 2 repeated.

"Friend," Steven smiled.

The man burst out into tears and collapsed to the ground. "How moving! I'm touched! You would really ask me, your most hated enemy, to be your friend?! To ask for my dream?!"

"I do," the boy replied gently.

"Is it that hard to believe?" Genevieve pointed out. "I was part of Baroque Works too, yet here I am."

"I...I..." Mr. 2 sniffled. "I want to meet the Okama Queen: Emporio Ivankov! It has always been my life goal to merely talk to the man! I hoped this would be my chance to find him!"

"You sold out my country to meet a damn okama queen?!" Kohza yelled from behind Steven. "What the hell is wrong with you?!"

"Hey, don't judge me! Zero-chan can be very persuasive!" Mr. 2 defended himself, readopting a fighting stance.

"Woah! Woah!" Steven tried to calm everyone down. "How about this: Mr. 2, have you seen Vivi?"

"The princess?" Mr. 2 kept his eyes on Kohza. "Yes, she's tied up and knocked out in the kitchen. Allsunday-chan told me to keep her alive and unharmed...but I jumped the gun, as shameful as that is to admit."

"Miss Allsunday?" Steven turned to the rebel leader and put his hands together. "Mr. Kohza, you know your way around the palace, right? Can you please rescue Vivi? We'll take care of Mr. 2."

Kohza narrowed his eyes suspiciously, but Carue made a quacking noise, showing that he trusted the children. He conceded and ran out of the room toward the kitchen, off to rescue his childhood friend.

"Hey!" Mr. 2 shouted. "I can't let the princess escape! Zero-chan would..."

"I already told you: Crocodile is in jail!" Steven explained again. "Luffy and I took care of him. In fact, Miss Allsunday helped save my life!"

"Whaaaaaaaaaat?! I'm soooooooo confused!" Mr. 2 slumped down into the throne, shaking his head. "If Allsunday-chan helped stop Zero-chan, why would she give us orders to keep up appearances?!"

The three kids stopped and thought about it. Technically, he had a point. Why WOULD Nico Robin tell the Baroque Works Agents to maintain their posts and not to turn themselves in? "Maybe she was counting on the Straw Hats to stop them?" Connie suggested.

"If she's got such a high bounty..." Genevieve thought aloud. "Maybe she was hoping to use the confusion of the fighting to escape unnoticed by the Marines."

"But then why did she join Baroque Works in the first place?" Connie countered that idea.

"This thinking is hurting my head!" Mr. 2 bemoaned. "So...what now, Tiger-chan? I can't just give myself up to the people...I'd be thrown in jail or worse!"

"Wait..." Genevieve thought about it. "You said you wanted to meet Ivankov, right?"

"Yes indeed, Painter-chan!" Mr. 2 nodded.

"Didn't he get captured by the Marines and got sent to Impel Down a few months back? Didn't it make headlines around the world?"

"HE DID?!" Mr. 2 asked in shock, before hitting himself in the head. "Oh yeah, he did! Why? I know not; but my hope was to use my position in this country to barter for his release into the world!"

Steven and Connie exchanged looks. "Do you have any idea what is going on?" Connie whispered to her friend.

"Not at all. I still haven't figured out what an 'okama' is either. I think it's a dancer," Steven admitted.

"If you were to admit your part in this, you'd probably be sent to Impel Down too," the former Miss Goldenweek tried to reason with the man. "Then you might have a chance to meet him."

"What's Impel Down?" Steven finally asked.

"It's the worst prison in the world, Steven," she explained. "It is the absolute last place anyone would want to go...except potentially our Mr. 2 here."

The boy stared at the ballerina, who was deep in thought. Technically, Mr. 2 should be thrown in jail for trying to kill Vivi and the others, but if he were to judge that, then so should Petrea, Damian, Genevieve, and Robin. He couldn't ask him to throw away his life just to save the country. There had to be another way to handle the situation. "No!" Steven said suddenly. "You can't!"

"What?" Genevieve and Mr. 2 said in unison.

"I can't let you go to jail, Mr. 2!" Steven cried. "It wouldn't be right!"

"...but he WANTS to go to jail, Steven," Genevieve pointed out.

"Do you mean to tell me that after everything I have done, you wouldn't lock me up and throw away the key?" Mr. 2 started to tear up again. "I have never been so moved in my life! No Tiger-chan, the girl is right! I will indeed give myself up for your cause! It is the only way to make up for my crimes!"

"You don't care about your crimes," Genevieve squinted her eyes at him knowingly. "You just want to meet Ivankov."

The okama fell down in embarrassment. "...still, I'm not sure how well giving myself up would go considering I'm not sure WHERE the king is!"

"That is a problem," Steven frowned. "It's not like we could go ask the rebels or the royal army anything. They all think you are the king...oh man, what do we do?!"

"We stop the fighting!" the voice of Kohza called out. The man, followed by Carue, appeared in the room escorting a most welcomed sight: Princess Nefeltari Vivi, who looked like she just woke up from a long, painful sleep.

"VIVI!" Steven started to cry and ran over to hug his friend. "You are okay! This is great!"

"Steven...not so hard!" Vivi laughed weakly, prying the boy off of her. She put her hands to her head. "Ugh, my father...where...?" She looked around until she got to Mr. 2, still wearing her father's clothes. He waved to her and the princess' expression immediately soured. "YOU!"

"Hi Princess-chan! Sorry for knocking you out! No hard feelings?" Mr. 2 laughed before getting nudged by Genevieve, who gave a soft cough. "I mean...I'm sorry for knocking you out, impersonating your father, and participating in a civil war set to destroy your country!"

"Smooth," Genevieve shook her head in disbelief. "Really smooth."

"Mr. 2..." Steven tapped his foot. "What did we talk about?"

"Fine," he sighed theatrically. "Princess, I hereby surrender myself to you and your people! I will admit any wrongdoing on my part on the condition I may be transferred to Impel Down!"

Vivi and Kohza blinked their eyes and took in what he said. "...what?!"

"We can figure this out later!" Vivi said, rubbing her head but taking the lead. "We need to stop the fighting now before it gets out of control!" She turned to Mr. 2 and stopped right in front of him. "I don't know why you are doing this but if this helps save my people...I may look past you knocking me out."

"I wouldn't have it any other way my dear!"

\*AGITR\*

"Holy crap! What the hell happened to Petrea?!" Damian cried as he saw Greg carry the limp body of the former Miss Valentine, finally



reuniting most of their two groups. Zoro and Pearl had yet to make it to them, but the Straw Hats and Crystal Gems found an area away from the fighting to assess their situation.

"She got hurt really bad fighting that blue-haired lady," Greg explained. "Chopper, you're the doctor right? Can you look her over?"

"Right! No problem!" Chopper replied, taking out his medicine bag to procure the necessary tools.

"I'm guessing since you guys don't look too beat up that you took care of the 'Mr. 4 Pair,'" Nami sighed in relief. "Thank god for small miracles."

"It was quite a fight," Garnet admitted. "If only my gauntlets were working..."

"STOP PRETENDING, YOU FAKER!" Usopp yelled at her. He looked over to Damian, who he expected to be joining in, but he was kneeling down beside his former partner, holding her hand as Chopper started cleaning out her wounds.

"Well we took down half of the group...but Amethyst sustained some serious damage," Greg pointed to Nami, who flashed Amethyst's gemstone to Usopp and Garnet. The other Gem picked up the rock and frowned.

"Darn it. There's no telling how long it will take her to regenerate. Pearl is not going to like this...wherever she may be. I assume they are not back yet..." Garnet looked around before returning to examining Amethyst's gemstone for cracks.

The navigator pointed back towards where they arrived from. "No. They are probably still fighting that Mr. 1 guy. I wouldn't worry. Zoro is pretty strong and, from what we saw, Pearl may be even stronger."

Garnet chuckled for a moment. "Hmm. 'May.'"

"So explain this whole 'regeneration' thing to me," Usopp asked. "She's a rock now?"

"A Gem's consciousness is not in its physical body, but rather the gemstone at the heart of each Gem. We create physical bodies to interact with the world, but as long as one's gemstone goes undamaged, the Gem in question could remain living practically indefinitely," Garnet tried to explain to Nami and Usopp, as Chopper and Damian were busy with Petrea. "However, if her physical body was too damaged, it would need time to reform in the gemstone. After the Gem considers herself fully healed, the Gem would be reborn just as she was, though with a bit of cosmetic changes for good measure."

"...so do Gems die?" Nami asked, very interested in the conversation. "Are...are you immortal?"

"Only as long as my gemstones remains undamaged," Garnet kept a neutral face. "If it were to crack, I would slowly break down into madness and physical deformity. But if my gemstones were to shatter...I'd cease to be."

"Gemstones?" Nami picked up on the word. "You have more than one? Is that a pure-blooded Gem thing?"

"Nah, I'm just a fusion," Garnet said offhandedly.

"WHAT?!" Nami and Usopp shouted at the same time.

"Not so loud!" Chopper scolded them. "This is very sensitive! I need to be able to work!"

"But...but...I never would have guessed that you were a fusion!" Usopp stammered. "You've been together the entire time we have known you!"

"And longer than that," Garnet gave the tiniest of smirks. "This is who I am...and this is how I want to live my life."

The two pirates stared at each other. Usopp went to open his mouth to ask a question before getting hit by Nami, shutting him down immediately before he started. "Then that's wonderful, Garnet."

"Hey look!" Greg pointed away from them. "It's Pearl...and she's carrying Zoro! Why is she carrying Zoro?!"

"I told you I'm fine!" he was complaining to the Gem. His entire stomach was wrapped in bandages in a comical manner. "There's no need to treat me like a child!"

"I'm not treating you like a child! Do you have ANY idea how much blood you lost in that fight?! The fact you are talking to me defies logic!" Pearl countered back to the swordsman.

"Zoro! What happened to you?!" Nami, Greg, Usopp, and Garnet met the two of them, letting Chopper do his work.

"He lost liters upon liters of blood!" Pearl shook her head in disbelief. "He suffered multiple stab wounds and refuses to lie down in peace!"

"I cut steel!" Zoro grinned.

"That doesn't change the fact you need proper medical attention!" Pearl lectured. "I don't know human anatomy that well to do more than a patch job!"

"Why do you even carry around bandages in your gem anyway?!" Zoro frowned. "Do you even bleed?"

"If you must know I started carrying them after I began training Connie," Pearl said defensively. "And no, I do not bleed! Come on, where is that nice reindeer doctor? He can check you out..."

"Sorry, Pearl..." Greg informed her with a hint of worry in his voice. "Chopper is a bit busy at the moment."

"What does that...oh no," Pearl gasped, noticing him at last. She ran up beside them. It had been several minutes since Chopper began work on her and she was bandaged up with several bloody gauze pads discarded to the side. "Will she be alright?!"

"She's stabilized," Chopper explained, wiping sweat off of his brow. "Her body took a lot of damage and suffered a lot of trauma...plus her foot and ankle need time to close up their wounds...but yes, Petrea will be fine."

"Thank god!" Damian cried to the heavens, batting away a few tears

he tried to hide behind his sunglasses. "Chopper, I love you man!"

"Stop it, you asshole!" Chopper tried to hide his happiness but failed as per usual.

"Um...Chopper, is it?" Pearl asked him. "Would you be able to look over Zoro's wounds as well?"

"I SAID I'M FINE!" Zoro yelled. "What's important is that we regroup with the others and try to stop the fighting. First off, where's the purple one?"

Greg pointed to the stone in Garnet's hand. "She's healing."

"Oh, Amethyst!" Pearl shook her head. "What did you do?!"

"She saved Petrea's life!" Greg frowned. "The spike lady did a number on her body."

"...oh," Pearl now looked concerned at Amethyst's gem. "She's stubborn but she'll be back before we know it."

"Alright, that answers one question...kind of," Zoro just let Gem physics fly right by him. "Where do we stand with eyebrows and Luffy?"

"We haven't seen them or the kids yet," Greg looked around. "We'll probably have to start looking around the city for them."

"Don't forget about Lion," Garnet added. "He's still searching for the king. With luck, Steven and the others will have found the princess and together we all can show the opposing forces that they have been deceived...if we can get them to stop fighting long enough to hear it."

"...okay, this may sound stupid, but what IS Lion?" Usopp blurted out. "I mean, I get that he's a lion, but are all lions pink in your world or is it because Steven's shield and gem are pink or what?"

Pearl and Garnet exchanged a look. "Honestly, outside of Lion's connection with Rose Quartz, even we don't know much about him."

"Rose...you mean Steven's mom?" Usopp thought about it.  
"Hmm...quite the mystery. I...speak of the devil!"

On cue, the familiar pink form of Lion sped up to them. On his back were the knocked out forms of two people. One of them was a man with weird hair and a purple jacket and the other was a woman wearing a frog outfit. Lion himself was growling angrily and motioning to the heart of Alubarna.

"Did...did he know we were talking about him?!" Usopp freaked out at the coincidence.

"Lion, what's wrong? Did you find the king?" Pearl asked.

Lion shook his head and continued to growl and roar. Chopper stopped dancing around and ran over to him. The two conversed for a moment until Chopper fell backwards in fear.

"WHAT?! YOU'RE SERIOUS?!" Chopper yelled.

"You can understand Lion?" Pearl raised an eyebrow. "What did he say?"

"He said he smelled something funny coming out of the clock tower and found these two bad guys up there!" Chopper pointed to the unconscious bodies. "But that's not the bad part! They were guarding a giant bomb! Lion stopped the fuse but it is still ticking!"

"A BOMB?!" the group, save Petrea, yelled in horror.

"Wait, how big is the bomb?" Damian asked. "Like a big bomb or..."

Chopper looked to the lion and listened to his cried. "WHAT?! Lion says that it is huge! We can't carry it out by ourselves!"

"AHHH! IT'S GOING TO DESTROY US ALL! DESTROY US ALL! DESTROY US ALL! DEST..." Usopp started to run around in circles in a panic, before getting hit by Nami.

"THAT'S NOT HELPING!"

"Then the mission priorities have changed," Garnet commanded.

"We need to get to the town square and get rid of that bomb!"

"How are we going to do that?!" Nami asked, ignoring Usopp's continued ranting in the background.

"I've got a few ideas."

# The Bomb In The Square

The clock tower was still as Lion's roar echoed throughout. In an instant, the Straw Hats and Gems found themselves face to face with a giant bomb inside of a cannon. It was circular with a giant clock on the front of it. Based on the size of it, it could wipe out the entire city with its blast.

And, judging by the face of the clock, it was set to blow within the next ten minutes.

"GAH!" Usopp cried. "WE CAN'T OPEN IT!"

"You yell a lot, don't you?" Pearl observed.

"He has his moments," Nami admitted.

The Gem started to look over the spherical weapon. "Can the bomb be moved?"

Garnet walked over to it and picked it out of the cannon, requiring both hands to lift it over her head before setting it back down in the center of the clock tower. "It can."

"Lion, why don't you just transport it away?" Pearl asked. "It seems simple enough."

Lion let out an offended growl and Chopper turned to the Gems and translated it for them. "Lion said it was too heavy to move by himself and he didn't want to try teleporting it with so much time left on the clock. He doesn't know the area very well and didn't want to accidentally send it to a place with people on it."

"Fair enough," the peach-blond Gem examined the bomb. "We could always fuse and throw the bomb into the air..."

"My thinking exactly," Garnet nodded.

"Hey," Nami peered down from the side of the tower and looked out into the crowd. "Something is going on down there!"

"You mean BESIDES the endless bloodshed?" Greg looked over the edge and scanned the Alubarnan Square for anything out of the ordinary. Eventually his eyes saw a tiny white object being waved around by what he gathered was a person. "Hey, is that a white flag?!"

"A white flag?" Pearl, along with the others on Lion, left the bomb and joined them on the side. "They are surrendering? Is it the rebels or the royal army? This whole conflict is so convoluted, I swear!"

Before anyone could add to the conversation, Lion's ears picked up and started growling at Chopper again. "Really? He's there? Them too? That's great!" The reindeer started clapping excitedly. "Lion smells Steven, Connie, and Genevieve down there! They might have found Vivi!"

"That is great!" Greg smiled. "He did...wait, why is he in the middle of a war zone?! He could be killed!"

Not even two seconds later, a gunshot was heard and one of the white flags fell to the ground. The crowd began to resume their fighting, intensifying their attacks and leaving Steven and the others stuck right out in the open. This, Pearl understood, would just not do.

"STEVEN!" Pearl jumped down from the top of the tower and started falling down toward the crowd.

"...she's really eager, isn't she?" Usopp observed, fearful for his friends and himself.

"She has her moments."

"Come on, Lion," Zoro told the pink creature. "We can't let her have all the fun. Do your roar thing so we can get down there!"

"What about the bomb?" Greg asked, watching Pearl land below. "Is it smart to just abandon it?"

"You guys stay if you want to and Lion can just come back after dropping me off," the swordsman smirked despite his pain. "I'm going down there if it kills me."



"You're not the only one," Damian added, cracking his neck. "I think it's time that I get my severance pay from Baroque Works. The one who knocks out the least buys drinks?"

"You're on!"

"You heard them, Lion," Garnet smirked. "I think they want to go help Steven."

Lion roared proudly, allowing Zoro and Damian to climb on his back as he created a new spatial rift to bring the two to the war zone. Now left with just Chopper, Greg, Nami, Usopp, and the still slumbering Petrea, Garnet began to run through her options in her head.

"I just had a terrible thought," Greg said. "Crocodile has lied to the people of this place for years, right? What's there to say that this isn't going to blow before the timer runs up?"

"That...that is totally a Crocodile-like thing to do!" Usopp freaked out again. "Gah! Now I don't know what to believe!"

He went to run around again and tripped on Petrea, falling right on top of her. The woman stirred and slowly opened her eyes.

"What...what happened? I..." she muttered before seeing Usopp's face directly in hers. "WHAT THE HELL?!"

She pushed Usopp off of her with all of her might, surprisingly sending him well into the wall. The injured woman clutched her side in pain, but then looked at her hands. "That...was new. I didn't change my weight...so how did I do that?"

"You shouldn't be awake!" Chopper rushed to her side. "Usopp, how could you?!"

"It's...it's okay, Chopper," she smiled despite wincing. She disregarded her earlier action and focused on the reindeer. "You've helped me yet again...ahh!"

"Your foot is still hurt badly! Don't try to get up!" Chopper ordered her.

"From what I hear, you did a brave thing defending Amethyst like that," Garnet bent down to her level. "Thanks."

"Amethyst...oh god!" Petrea started to tear up emotionally. "I am so sorry! I...I wasn't strong en..."

"Don't worry about her," the Gem gently put a hand on her shoulder. "She'll be fine. I'll explain later. You've kind of woken up at a bad time."

"...how bad?"

\*AGITR\*

"Are you sure this is it?" Nico Robin asked King Nefeltari. "This is all of the Poneglyph?"

"Yes," Cobra frowned sadly. "And you can read this thing?"

Robin surveyed the giant stone monolith. Here she was in the room containing Alabasta's greatest secret: the way to the ancient weapon Pluton. Of course, while this was Crocodile's main reason for capturing the country of Alabasta, it was not Robin's reason for being here. All she wanted was more information about the Void Century. She couldn't let Cobra know about it, though. He saw her like everyone else did: a monster.

Admittedly, she did kidnap him and force him to take her to this secret tomb, but it was the only way to get here.

"I can," Robin replied. "Once I finish reading this, you will be free to go."

"Is that supposed to make me feel safe?"

"Take it how you will," Robin sighed. She got to work and started to read the block of text that adorned it. Word by word, sentence by sentence, she scanned for any reference to her prize. By the time she reached the end, she learned the sad truth: this was just a map to one of the ancient weapons of this world, just like Crocodile hoped.

As she was about to let Cobra go, a voice cried out throughout the tomb beneath the Royal Temple: "HEY! WE ARE HERE FOR VIVI'S DAD!"

"What?!" Cobra jumped at the noise, having no idea who the voice belonged to. Robin, on the other hand, knew exactly who it was, and was shocked to see him there.

"It seems as if you are being rescued, Your Highness," Robin smiled. "Why don't you go to your protectors and let me be?"

"...what even was this?" Cobra asked as two sets of footsteps made their way closer to them. "You haven't personally hurt me, only the Marines who provoked you, and have yet to make any comment about what was on this Poneglyph."

"It doesn't matter," Robin muttered. "What I wanted wasn't here. Now go, before you give me a reason to 'personally hurt you.'"

He gave her a confused and stern look before leaving towards the Straw Hat, who had just made himself known with an unknown blond-haired man. Robin locked eyes with the pirate and was about to take the opportunity to leave when he gave an order to his friend. "Sanji, take the king back to the palace. I have some business with this girl."

"What kind of business would YOU have with such a BEAUTIFUL woman by yourself in a tomb you shithead?!" Sanji started to complain before Luffy shot him a look. "Fine...but I'm doing this for Vivi-chan!"

"And who might you two be?" Cobra asked his savior. "How do you know my daughter?"

"I'll tell you along the way!" Sanji told him as they exited the tomb, leaving Nico Robin alone with the pirate that carried the name of D.

"Monkey D. Luffy. I see that you are yourself again," Robin spoke first. "I'm sure the story behind your little trick with Steven Universe is a good one."

"Hmm? You mean Luffy? Yeah, it's kind of weird but cool at the

same time!" Luffy smiled. "I wanted to ask you something...Robin right? Or do you like the Miss Sunday name?"

"Allsunday," she corrected. "Which I suppose is no longer of any use. I take it since you are here talking to me that you have defeated my former partner?"

He nodded. "Don't worry; I'm not going to fight you. I just wanted to know...why did you save us back there?"

"Self-preservation," Robin replied. "I believed Crocodile was going to betray me and I wanted to get him before he got me."

"I don't believe that," Luffy frowned. "You know, Steven really believes in you. Did you know that?"

"Does he now?" Robin forced a laugh. "Then he's a fool. Whatever would make him think that way?"

"He's got a way with people. He gets them...I should know. When I fused with Steven, I could feel his feelings for you and I could sense what he sensed."

"Interesting."

"Yeah," Luffy shrugged. "I don't really get it. All I know is that I think that you're a nice girl too. I don't care that you have a high bounty or any of what Smokey was saying before."

"Is that really all you wanted to say?" Robin asked incredulously.

"That I'm a 'nice girl?'"

"Basically!" Luffy laughed. He noticed the Poneglyph and stared at it. "What's this thing? What's this writing on here?"

"It's nothing...another lead dashed..." Robin frowned. "...why are you starting at me like that?"

"What do you mean by 'lead?'" Luffy asked another question like a young child. He was persistent, Robin gave him that.

"I'm looking for something. I thought this was it, but it wasn't," Robin

sighed, getting finished with this conversation. She liked the pirate well enough, but this was getting repetitive. "Now if you don't mind, I'm going to keep looking for it."

"What are you looking for anyway?"

"Why do you care?!" Robin snapped. "That is my business! You have no reason at all to even want to know about me!"

"Sure I do!"

"What possible reason could you have to...?!" Robin started before locking eyes with Luffy. His eyes were wide and full of life, something Robin hadn't known for herself in years. She was taken back for a moment, curious to see what he would possibly say next.

"I want you to be my nakama!" Luffy smiled.

"What?! You didn't even know my name until earlier today! I've killed and hurt this country more than Goldenweek or Valentine or Five ever did! I blew up your precious princess' friend after you left Whiskey Peak, didn't I?"

"Oh yeah," Luffy removed his hat and scratched his head. "I forgot about that...I don't know. For some reason, I don't think that he's hurt...well, either way I guess you'd have to make up for it by telling us what you're looking for!"

"I...I don't know how to respond to this! I..." Robin was very flustered and caught off-guard. This was the last thing she had expected when she assisted this pirate and the young boy earlier. Between the two of them, they had managed to look past everything the Marines told them and all of what they experienced with their own eyes to seek Robin out and let her know that they cared about her.

It defied logic.

"Tell you what," Luffy put his hat back in his head. "I'm sure you know where our boat is docked. If you want to come, meet us there, but remember I want to know what your dream is! If you don't want to join, then do you know what will happen the next time I see you?"

Robin shook her head, half-expecting him to say they would be enemies and he would never forgive her. That is an answer that would make disappearing from this country all the more easier. Unfortunately, that was far from Luffy's response.

"I'm gonna keep trying until I make you part of my crew! I'm gonna go now and check up on them!" He made a motion that he was about to leave before stopping. "Thank you again for saving us! See you later!"

With that, Nico Robin was alone with nothing but her thoughts...and thoughts she had plenty of.

\*AGITR\*

In the middle of town square, the fighting raged on. The royal army, led by Alabasta's protector Chaka, had been doing their best to try to keep casualties to a minimum. Unfortunately, it seemed as if there were a lot of trigger-happy people on both sides of this conflict and it was proving difficult to see a peaceful ending to this conflict.

That is, until the palace doors opened up unexpectedly, revealing several new and familiar faces. Chaka almost fainted when he saw Princess Vivi side by side with Kohza. He had not seen her in over two years and it did his heart well knowing that she had survived this terrible conflict to this point. Figuring out why Kohza was in the castle or how they got there was irrelevant. All that mattered was that they might have a chance to stop the fighting if they were working together.

"Princess!" Chaka managed to exclaim.

"Chaka, we need you to distribute these immediately!" Vivi told him, pointing to numerous white flags being held by three unknown children. "There will be time for hugs later. We need to surrender to the rebels to stop the fighting!"

"I...I don't understand..." Chaka stammered. "What...?"

"Listen, this whole war has been a trap by Crocodile to assume control of the country! My friends have been fighting him and his

friends for some time now! All we have to do is stop the fighting and this nightmare will be over!"

"It's true, Chaka," Kohza frowned, dragging Mr. 2 along with him. "Meet the bastard responsible for causing half of our problems!"

"Bonjour!" he waved. Chaka noted that this odd, effeminate man was wearing the king's clothing, which unnerved him to no end.

"He ate a Devil Fruit that gives him the ability to change his appearance to anyone he touches, including Papa!" Vivi explained. "He's been helping Crocodile sow discord between the people!"

"Including telling us about how he used Dance Powder to steal the rain," Kohza shot a dirty look at the man, who looked down sheepishly.

The captain of the guard thought about everything that was being presented to him and tried to piece it together. "And you captured this criminal?"

"I surrendered!" the odd man pointed out. "On the condition that I get sent to Impel Down for my crimes!"

"...that can be arranged," Chaka blinked, doing his best not to strike him down where he stood. "Still, I think I see where you are going with this."

He grabbed the white flags from the kids, one of which smiled and tried to wave before dropping the flags he was holding, and passed them out to the men guarding the palace walls. "Men, for the good of the kingdom, we will follow what Kohza requests us to do! Follow his lead and do as he says!"

If there were any questions about the situation, the soldiers kept it to themselves. Chaka noticed some of the guards clutching to their weapons, but he dismissed it as nerves. He needed to get the impostor king to Kohza's side and for Princess Vivi to remain out of harm's way.

Taking his place at the head of the army, Kohza hoisted his flag high, prompting the others to do the same. At once, a sea of white

appeared in the bloody capital, causing all of the fighting rebels and soldiers to pause and look at the sight. In this single moment, it appeared as if the war had stopped.

"My friends...my brothers! We need to stop this fighting at once! We have all been deceived by a villain so foul, he made us turn on each other. I present to you one of the men responsible for this..." Kohza began before the unthinkable happened.

As Kohza was speaking and preparing to display the king's impostor to the country, one of the soldiers Chaka was observing fired his rifle at Kohza, shooting him several times. The sight sickened him but it was lessened ever so slightly as he watched the prisoner, who could have taken the opportunity to flee, catch his enemy and began to sob. Vivi started screaming his name behind him, as did the children.

But it was the rebels who took it the worst. They began to grow out of control and Chaka could not blame them. Their leader had just been shot by the royal army under a white flag. This was easily perceived as the ultimate betrayal from the king, from their government. He did not know why that man had fired his rifle, but he sure as hell would find out, even as the city descended into violence once more.

As he turned to scold him, he found that one of the children had tackled him first. "I knew it! I knew that there had to be spies here!"

"What happened?!" Chaka asked frantically. By this point, Vivi had gone to check on Kohza with the strange man, leaving the children behind with Carue. "Who are you? Friends of the princess?!"

"You could say that," the girl frowned. She pulled up the shooter's arm, revealing a strange tattoo. "I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but we've got a problem. If Baroque Works has infiltrated your army in disguise, I'd bet my rice crackers that the rebels have them there as well. This war is even more rigged than we feared."

"...how can you be so calm when revealing such important news, Genevieve?!" the boy snapped. "What do we do?!"



"I..." the girl called Genevieve started to say before she was cut off from a giant cry coming from the nearby clock tower.

A woman had just jumped off from the top of the tower and had landed in the middle of the fighting and was now making her way through the violence. She was not alone, as Chaka barely made out a pink creature appearing out of nowhere carrying and dropping off a swordsman and a man with sunglasses before disappearing with a roar.

"It seems as they all finished their fights," Genevieve noted. "This is good, they can buy us time."

"For what?" the other little girl asked worriedly.

"We need to separate the Baroque Works members from the others before everybody starts killing each other! I think I can do that, but I need paint!" she explained, shifting her eyes around her in paranoia. "You, captain guy. Please tell me you have paint in the palace!"

Chaka, not understanding this at all but anxious to return to his princess' side, nodded and told her exactly where to go. She hopped on Carue and sped back inside the palace in search of paint for some reason.

This day was beginning to make less and less sense, but the sense of foreboding only grew with each passing second.

\*AGITR\*

Sanji and the king hurried through the halls of the palace to reach the head of the oncoming conflict. Though they left the temple not that long ago, they found themselves in the rough position of hiding a king in a war. No matter what they did, it was nigh impossible to sneak Cobra anywhere. It was even harder to leave the poor Tashigi and her men behind, though they were looking far better then they did before. He wished to help her himself, but his orders from Luffy forced him to keep his eyes on the mission...especially when it meant getting to be on Vivi's dad's good side.

Cobra, for his part, directed Sanji to a secret passage that they used

to bypass most of the fighting. It was important for them to reach Chaka and Pell, the other protector of Alabasta, and inform them of what had transpired.

"If we continue further down here, we will be at the main entrance!" Cobra was yelling, directing Sanji as they both ran.

"Just lead the way, sir!" Sanji told him.

As they ran, they came across a most unexpected sight: Genevieve on Carue's back heading towards them. The duck tried to stop running, but collided right into them, knocking all four of them backwards.

"Carue?!" Cobra exclaimed. "You're here?!"

"Quack!" Carue spoke excitedly.

Sanji, meanwhile, grumbled to himself as he rubbed his head. "Shitty duck...I ought to...oh, hey," he noticed Genevieve on the floor and helped her up. "What the hell are you doing in here? Did you find Vivi-chan?"

"She's outside," Genevieve pointed towards the entrance. "But that's not important right now. I need paint...immediately. Carue is taking me to find some. I may need some help if it's too tall for me to reach."

"...you want me to leave Vivi-chan's noble father to help you get paint?" Sanji forced a laugh. "Why the hell do you need to do that?"

"Because this could end the war right now!" Genevieve actually started to get angry. "We don't have a lot of time...oh." The young painted turned and bowed to the king. "You're the king. Sorry about that. I'm Genevieve, Vivi's friend and former enemy...it's complicated."

"Don't worry about it!" Cobra got up off the floor. "What do you mean by ending the war? And how is Vivi?!"

"It's easier to just do what I have to do than explain it! Which way is the storage room?"

Cobra pointed down the corridor where she was originally headed. "It's next to the china room. You can't miss it."

"Thanks," Genevieve nodded as she remounted Carue with Sanji reluctantly doing the same. "You might want to come too, Your Highness. It's bad out there and it's only getting worse."

"If it is that bad out there," Cobra started toward the palace door. "Then I should be there to tend to my people. I refuse to hide myself any longer."

"Suit yourself!" Genevieve called from the now speeding Carue. The duck was flying as Genevieve caught Sanji up to speed and learned what he knew.

"So, that's why that shitty okama wasn't with the others. Makes sense," Sanji commented angrily. "Damn it, I wanted to fight him!"

"If it's any consolation, nobody fought him."

Finally reaching their destination, Genevieve and Sanji went to work scouring the room for a paintbrush and some paint. After a moment, Genevieve spotted some in a corner and prepared a makeshift palette for herself.

"It's not perfect, but it will do," she sighed. "Come on, Sanji. We've got to..."

He put his hand up to silence her and closed his eyes. "Shh. Someone is in the next room...and I don't think he knows we are here."

The two humans and the duck remained silent as they listened in on the china room. Sure enough, there was noise coming from it, and it appeared as if a man was talking to himself.

"...the fighting restarting is good for me! Once I raid the china, I'll examine the throne room for any treasure I can find and then I'll make my daring escape! Using the war as a backdrop to get rich...such a genius plan!"

The painter and the chef stared at each other for a moment before

coming to the same conclusion. "...it couldn't be...could it?" Genevieve asked, starting to get anxious.

"I think so, and I'm gonna kick his shitty ass in! Want to help?" He asked. "You have just as much right to beat the shit out of him as I do."

The girl thought about it for a second and looked at her impromptu palette. "Hmm...give me a moment."

She simply walked out of the room and entered the china room. Sanji heard the sound of glass breaking, followed by **"Color Trap: Tranquil Green!"** Not knowing exactly what that meant, the blond and the duck shrugged and decided to see exactly what was happening in the room.

Before they could leave, Genevieve returned and propped herself back up on Carue. "Good. The paints work. He's all yours in there. Have fun," she gave a small wave to him. "Come on, Carue. We've got a war to stop."

"Quack!"

The duck and the painter sped off back to the battlefield, leaving Sanji alone in the room. He made his way into the next room just to see what exactly she did. The sight brought a smile to the cook's face.

A bespectacled man was sitting on the floor, staring at the wall with broken china all around him. His glasses were broken and his right eye was freshly bruised. On his shirt was a familiar green symbol: the mark of the Color Trap. If this were any other person, Sanji would feel bad that they were used as a guinea pig.

However, since this was Mr. 3, who had somehow made it here all the way from Rain Dinners in order to rob the palace, Sanji had no such feelings. Instead, he just kicked his ass.

\*AGITR\*

With the battle resumed and intensified, Steven was faced with a serious dilemma. He wanted to run and help the soldiers, but he

didn't know who he could trust. The whole situation was becoming more than Steven could handle. Kohza was shot, Pearl was fighting people without knowing if they were good or bad, and the fighting did not look like it would ever end.

And there were Steven and Connie, right there in the middle of it all.

"Connie, I want you to get back to the palace!" Steven begged her. "I don't know what's going to happen right now!"

"What about you?!" Connie asked worryingly. "You are in just as much danger as I am!"

"I at least have my shield!"

"I have your mother's sword!"

The two children realized that neither of them had a strong position to argue about, so they just huddled together as Steven created a bubble around them. "Are you okay?" Steven asked, doing everything he could not to close his eyes at the sights around him.

"...yeah," Connie said, also very uncomfortable. "This...this is just a lot to take in."

"I know," the boy frowned. "Do...do you think this is how the war with Homeworld probably was?"

"Probably," Connie replied softly. "I hate this. I hate not being able to help!"

"Me too," the half-Gem took the moment to hold Connie's hand.

"Hey, Connie...Genevieve told me that no matter what happened out here, that I needed to hold onto something...something to keep me going."

"What was it?"

"Our..." Steven gulped and turned beat red. "Our friendship."

The young girl's face began to glow as well. They didn't speak for a moment, ignoring a man dressed similarly to Mr. 2 walking by them

and taking his place by Vivi's side. For these two children, time stopped and they just had each other. They were best friends...jam buds. It was a bond that could never be broken: a bond between two lifelong friends.

Unfortunately, the two were jogged out of the moment by a tapping on the shield. It was Genevieve, giving a little smirk. In her hands was a piece of wood that had globs of paint splattered on it. "I'm sorry. Is this a bad time?"

The bubble immediately popped and the two children's faces somehow grew an even brighter shade of red. "I...err...that is..." Steven started to stammer before sighing.

"Don't worry about it. Steven, I need your help if this is going to work."

"Steven Universe reporting for duty!" he saluted, trying to play off his embarrassment. "What's going on?"

"I need you to do that thing with your shield that you did with Petrea against the banana gators. You need to launch me in the air so I can paint the crowd all in one shot!"

Steven gave her a quizzical look. "You can do that?"

"I'm gonna try! This is a lot for me, so you'd better appreciate it!" Genevieve frowned. "Are you going to throw me or not?"

The boy nodded and created his shield. Running faster than he had ever seen the lazy painter, she jumped on top of the pink shield and was catapulted in the air, screaming all the way. Steven and Connie watched as she reached high up in the sky and started mixing her colors together, seemingly in panic before crying out **"Color Trap: Friendship Yellow Green!"**

The paintbrush created a symbol in the air and as it made its way to the ground, the paint expanded, landing on practically all of the fighters in the square, including Steven, Connie, Vivi, Pearl, Zoro, and Damian. How this was happening, Steven had no idea, but it was amazing what Genevieve could do when she put her mind to it.

She really was a great person to call "friend!"

"Everybody stop fighting and put down your weapons...and somebody catch me!" she screamed as she plummeted toward the ground. At once, all of the fighters crowded beneath her, stretching their arms out to try to bring her to safety. Amazingly, the painter found herself plucked in the air by a giant falcon wearing a white headdress and a white robe.

"I've got you," the falcon said, unnerving Genevieve. "What did you just do?"

"I...I...I hypnotized them to be friendly so the fighting could stop," Genevieve whimpered, intimidated by the bird man. "Who are you?!"

"I'm Pell, one of the head guards of this kingdom," he replied, bringing them down to where Vivi was. "If you were going to do anything, I'd do it now. All eyes are on you kid. I'd move fast, because it looks like you aren't alone."

It was true. Before being set down, Genevieve could see a large group of Marines heading their way with; she couldn't believe it, Luffy joining them. He looked to be helping the Marine called Tashigi, but she didn't have time to think about it. The time was now to make up once and for all everything she did under Baroque Works.

The painter gulped and nodded, not used to being thrust into the spotlight. Finding her voice, she called out to her crowd. "Hey! All of you! If you work for Baroque Works, please come beside me without your weapons!"

With a chorus of murmuring, several dozen men stepped forward and presented themselves to the young painter, including Mr. 2. When everybody stopped moving, she pointed to them. "Citizens of Alabasta, these are the ones who have wrecked your country! These are the ones who have hurt you!" Genevieve found the strength to address everyone with conviction she never realized she had. "All of you rebels, royals, pirates, and Gems no longer have to be under my Color Trap, but as for the rest of you? Go and find the Marines and surrender yourself to them, explaining what you have

done...except you Mr. 2! Now!"

In a haze, the members of Baroque Works marched towards the oncoming Marines as the rest of the citizens snapped out of the trance. They stared at each other and looked at the parade of criminals leaving the former sight of the battle. "What happened?!" a random voice cried out. "Who are these people?"

"Who are you?!" the rebels cried out. It seemed as if the people wanted answers now that they realized something was going on. Genevieve turned to Vivi and her father, who stepped forward, holding Kohza up on his shoulder.

"My citizens, my friends, my people...we all have been deceived!" Cobra exclaimed to them. "Crocodile, the Shishibukai and self-proclaimed hero of the people, has been spending the last two years turning your trust against me and orchestrating this bloody civil war! Why, you may ask? To take command of our country to gain power!"

"How can we believe you?" someone shouted. "You attacked Kohza! You told us that you used Dance Powder!"

"People of this kingdom, I am ashamed to admit that your king was not to blame for that...I was!" Mr. 2 shouted, turning his face into Cobra's. "Everything your king has been saying is true! I can never ask for your forgiveness, but I have surrendered myself to be taken into custody as penance!"

"We have even more proof here!" Vivi added, showing the Black Den Den Mushi she had been holding onto. "This holds confessions from Crocodile himself! The man is presently in Marine custody and will answer for his crimes! We don't need to continue this bloody war! We must rebuild and regrow!" The princess started to openly weep at the sight of her kingdom finally listening to her. "Please, all of you! Can't we end this destructive conflict and bring peace and stability back to the kingdom?!"

"Play the Den Den Mushi!"

"We want to hear it!"



It appeared that several voices from the crowd were still not satisfied by the admissions of Mr. 2 and the king. Finally, a beam of light shine out from the crowd. Steven struggled to see what it was, but realized instantly that it was a projection from Pearl's gem. The form of Crocodile appeared above all of the people, scowling at them.

*"I'm a very busy man and I have a schedule to keep. It takes a lot of work to topple a country after all,"* the image spoke to them. After a moment, it flashed to a different image of him, laughing but also bloodier. *"What use have I for a Baroque Works meeting room when, in a few hours, this entire country will be mine?"*

"See, people?" Pearl announced theatrically. "This is your hero! This is your proof! Your hero is a sham and you have all been played! But listen to me, you are all in danger here! There is a bomb in the clock tower that is set to explode any minute now! We all need to leave at once."

Of course, Pearl failed to take into effect the panic that would ensue when announcing a bomb threat to a large group of people. As such, pandemonium returned to Alubarna as people raced to leave the city. All anyone could do now was wait to see what happened next.

\*AGITR\*

"...so basically we are screwed," Petrea frowned after Garnet explained what was happening with the bomb. "We don't know if we can trust the time on the bomb...which shows about five minutes left. What do we do now?"

"We need to toss it and hope that it won't hurt anyone!" Usopp continued to freak out, rubbing his neck after being thrust into the wall. "Garnet, you should fuse and make that giant woman!"

"I don't think there's enough time for that...your painter has made it a bit hard for us to get down there," Garnet noted, looking down in the crowd. She had been spying Genevieve's actions while giving Petrea the run down. It seemed as if she was giving some kind of speech, which hopefully was working.

"Okay then...what's Plan B?" Greg asked. "Have Lion teleport it

away?"

"Didn't he say that he needed to time it perfectly or else it could fall onto the crowd?" Nami reminded them. "We need to make a call soon!"

"Hold it," Garnet requested, keeping very still. Greg realized at once that she was using her Future Vision to figure out the best possible plan, and said as much to Nami. Finally, she pointed her finger at Petrea. "You...Petrea. You just did something before to the liar."

"SNIPER!"

"I..." the blonde was flustered and caught off-guard. "I don't really know..."

"Your powers involve you shifting your own weight, but I think you can do more than that. Think back and tell me if you have ever changed the weight of another object before in the past."

Petrea shook her head to protest, but then remembered something that happened right before she was sick that she didn't even think about: Steven had grabbed onto her and the two floated down to the banquet. She was so overwhelmed with Nami getting sick and, in retrospect, her own sickness, that she didn't even realize that she probably changed Steven's weight as well as her own.

It also made her realize that when Usopp complained that *"Can't you use your Devil Fruit powers to float her down there?!"* he was actually onto something and not just being ignorant.

"I...I think I did...but I've never tried to do it intentionally! I've only ever changed my own weight!" Petrea was in shock that there could still be more to learn about her Devil Fruit powers...as well as being in shock of how badly her body hurt.

"If you can make this as light as you can, I can easily throw this higher and further away!" Garnet held out her hand. "I need you to try!"

Nodding and hobbling over to the bomb, Petrea closed her eyes. She thought about how she would always change her weight, the

exact feeling she would apply to her body. Over the years it had become second nature to her. Capturing that feeling in her mind, she tried to project it onto the bomb. She felt silly trying to will a bomb to become as light as a feather, but after spending time with this crew, silliness meant nothing.

"Try it now," Petrea told her, praying that it worked. She was holding her concentration as much as she could and ignoring her pain. This was her final chance to right her wrongs and she was not about to ruin it.

The Gem attempted to lift up the bomb and, while she was able to lift it, it did not appear to have changed its weight. Petrea shut her eyes and focused once more, putting all of her abilities into this one task. She would do it for Steven, Vivi, Luffy, Sanji, Damian, and all of the others who believed in her to be more than just an assassin.

She may have once been Miss Valentine, but she was now her own person: Petrea the chocolatier, the woman who could make people lighter after eating her chocolate!

Garnet felt the shift in weight immediately and managed to hold the weapon in one hand like it was nothing, to the shock of the people watching. Noticing that the people below had started to run around in a panic, she knew this was the moment of truth. She launched the bomb high up into the air as it continued further and further away from the kingdom and the ground. She held her breath as she waited for the inevitable explosion, hoping that she had sent it far enough away.

Sure enough, the bomb went off high up in the sky, with Alubarna and all of Alabasta safely out of range. They had done it: the last remnants of Crocodile's attempted takeover of Alabasta had been swept away.

Petrea almost fell back to the floor before Garnet caught her. "Told you that you could do it!"

"I...I don't believe it!" Petrea started to cry tears of joy. "It's over!"

"It's over?" Greg asked, looking up in the sky where the explosion

happened.

"It's over," Nami smiled, joining him and patting his back.

"IT'S OVER!" Chopper and Usopp cried together. "WE DID IT!"

"We did it, Amethyst," Garnet pulled out Amethyst's gemstone. "We saved the day...and were awesome doing it. We'll make it up to you later for not seeing the end of it." She put Petrea on top of Lion and motioned for the others to join her. "Come on, there's only one thing left to do. We want to be in a good spot for the cap to all of this."

"Cap?" Usopp repeated. "What cap?"

"You'll see," Garnet kept a serious face.

As they mounted Lion, Nami decided to ask Garnet the only lingering thing that was on her mind. "I just have to know, why didn't you and Pearl fuse before she jumped down to help? Wouldn't this have been a lot easier?"

"I have my reasons why I held off. All you need to know is that it would have been more trouble than it would be worth," she replied cryptically.

Nami wanted to ask more about what she meant by that, but found that Lion had begun to roar, bringing them down into the square. The navigator looked around and saw the people had stopped running and were all standing still, looking at the sky.

What had started as an explosion led to a most startling development: the sky had grown dark. Rather than it being a foreboding darkness, Nami knew exactly what it meant:

Rain.

After so long being without water, the heavens opened up and delivered rain to the good people. Grown, hardened men broke down in tears at the beautiful sight. 'Guess I know what Garnet meant by 'cap' now.'

Moving quickly, they made their way through the celebrating crowd

to the palace doors. There they all were: Vivi with her father and a man who was shot, Genevieve talking with two men who were clearly of some importance in the Alabasta court, Zoro and Damian arguing about numbers, and Pearl watching Steven and Connie singing a song about singing in the rain.

"GUYS!" Steven cried out as he saw the rest of his friends, ending his duet. "Was that you?!"

"You betcha, Steven," Garnet ruffled the boy's hair.

"That was amazing!" he said in awe. "You guys saved our lives!"

"Kyahahahaha! What can we say?" Petrea forced a laugh. "If we've joined up with the Crystal Gems, we just have to save the day!"

The happy expression on Steven's face soured as he realized the extent of damage that was on her body. "Oh my gosh! What happened to you?! You are hurt really badly! Ahh!"

"It's okay, Steven," Garnet pulled down her sunglasses and winked with her top eye. "She'll be fine."

Stars filled Steven's eyes as he realized what she meant. "Future Vision!"

As the Straw Hats and Gems reunited with their friends, the last two people missing, Sanji and Luffy, made themselves known seemingly both at the same time. The palace doors swung open as Sanji dragged the limp form of Mr. 3 out into the rain. "Your Highness, where do you store your trash?"

"Sanji!" Vivi called to him. "How did you get into the palace?!"

"VIVI-CHAN, LOOK WHAT I DID FOR YOU! I STOPPED THAT SHITTY WAX HEAD FROM STEALING FROM YOU!" Sanji immediately reverted to his lovestruck mode, barely registering the rain.

"Mr. 3?" Vivi asked in shock. "How did he get here?!"

"He took us here on his ship, dear," Pearl walked up and frowned at

the sight of him. "He was so unpleasant. You must be the Vivi that Steven told us about."

"Steven?" Vivi asked, trying to figure out who this woman was. She only saw her when she projected Crocodile's face moments earlier. "I'm sorry, but you have me at a loss..."

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Your Majesty! I'm Pearl, from Steven's dimension," she bowed to her.

"WHAT?!" Vivi was shocked. "But...but...how?!"

"HEY!" the familiar voice of Luffy cried. "VIVI! GUYS! DO YOU SEE THE RAIN?!"

The crowd had made way for the small squadron of Marines that had entered the square. The Straw Hats had tensed up, but were shocked to see their captain walking side by side with Tashigi, who was in command. She did not appear to be in a good mood whatsoever, but she chose not to acknowledge any of the pirates, but rather made her way straight to the king and the princess.

"Your Majesty, the Marines are here to offer any assistance they can in this time of need. I have already placed several of the insurgents in custody already and will be glad to take any more off of your hands," the young Marine flashed a quick glance over to Steven and Luffy, who were hugging it out right next to them.

"I appreciate your help," King Cobra managed to get out. "But the country will need its own people to do the rebuilding. Nevertheless, it appears as if I have two more fugitives for you."

The king motioned to Mr. 3 and to Mr. 2, who had started dancing in the rain by Zoro, who clearly was not comfortable with the situation. "Both of these men were part of the conspiracy against my land and, as such, should be locked away in the heart of Impel Down."

"I agree," she kept a grim look on her face as she watched Mr. 2 give a tearful goodbye to Steven and Luffy. "In that case, we shall be going. Let's go, men."

"But..." one of her officers pointed to Luffy. "I don't get it! Why didn't

we..."

"NO ONE IS TO LAY A HAND ON THE STRAW HATS TODAY!" Tashigi yelled as she left the square with her prisoners in tow.

"I knew Tashigi was a good guy! I just knew it!" Steven smiled to himself.

"Well we just saved a government from collapse, took down a bunch of bad guys, stopped a civil war, destroyed a bomb, and got a free pass from the Marines for once," Usopp observed, taking in all of the sights around him. "What do we do now?"

\*AGITR\*

Rain pouring down on her face, Tashigi led all of the captured Baroque Works members toward her ship. Since the rain began and the bomb destroyed, Tashigi had focused her forces to only worry about the criminals who attacked the country and not those who defended it. It was the least she could do...though it hurt her pride the most.

She had failed in her mission. Yes, Alabasta was saved, but it wasn't by Marine hands. It was by pirates and alien creatures from another dimension. The Straw Hat made it a point to help her and her men back to the heart of Alubarna despite her threats to arrest him. His crew managed to get the rest of Baroque Works to surrender peacefully, discounting the members that were found knocked out around the city.

She wasn't strong enough to do anything right, she couldn't even stop Nico Robin. Worst of all, she found herself unable to arrest the Straw Hats, letting them be with the king while she saw the other criminals off to here. For this reason and more, she was afraid to show her disappointment to Smoker.

The ship was now in sight and, to Tashigi's surprise, so was another familiar ship. It was the command ship of the Black Cage Corps, Captain Hina's personal fleet. Hina was an old friend of Smoker who always treated Tashigi with respect when they would meet up. She had medium length pink hair and, for some reason, always referred

to herself in the third person like a child would. She did not know why Hina was there, but the thought of having to face her in addition to Smoker gave her anxiety.

As it turned out, the two of them were conversing outside on the ship around a table, but underneath a series of umbrellas that were set up. It was Smoker who noticed her first and surveyed the captives that were being brought on board. "Not bad," he called down to her. "Quite a haul you have there, Tashigi."

"You weren't joking, Smoker," Hina told her friend. "This really was a giant conspiracy. Hina is impressed."

Accepting the situation, Tashigi boarded the ship and prepared to give her report to her superior. "Sir, I regret to tell you that the Straw Hat pirates and the dimensional travelers have incapacitated these criminals, which I have since apprehended. Crocodile was nowhere to be seen, though the Princess Vivi informed us that he was in your custody. Nico Robin..." Tashigi fought back tears at this point, unable to look Smoker in the eye. "Nico Robin attacked and humiliated our men and vanished after capturing King Cobra. The king, however, was returned to the kingdom thanks, again, to the efforts of the Straw Hats."

"Fair enough," Smoker nodded. "And what about you, Tashigi? Do you feel like you performed to the best of your abilities?"

"...I do..." Tashigi frowned.

"Then that's all there is to it. You couldn't do it, so the Straw Hats stepped up, big time. The big question is, what do we do about it?"

"With your permission, I'd like to go and get some rest," Tashigi said almost bitterly. It wasn't because of Smoker, but rather her own self-loathing.

"Permission denied, Tashigi. You need to be caught up on a lot of things. Hina and I have been trying to think of the best way to handle this and we could use your opinion on this."

The comment was not at all what Tashigi was expecting. "What? I



mean, sir, yes sir! May I ask what has happened in my absence?"

"For starters, the two of us took down and dismantled the ships containing Dance Powder off the coast, hence this torrential downpour that doesn't seem to have an end in sight," Smoker gestured to the rain. "This was after we were hand delivered Crocodile from the Straw Hat, the Universe boy, and that giant woman."

"Giant woman?" Tashigi asked. "What giant woman?"

"Smoker believes that it is some kind of fusion between two of those Gem women you encountered," Hina added. "But that's not what the brass believes."

"While Straw Hat Luffy having a direct hand in bringing down a Shishibukai will have major ramifications in the world, the old bastards believe that the sudden appearance of a giant, four armed woman in one of the most prominent countries in the World Government is cause for concern," Smoker growled in frustration. "As it stands, the two of us have been promoted for bringing in Crocodile and have been given some credit for bringing stability to Alabasta. It's all one damn cover-up."

The comment barely registered in Tashigi's mind before she saw red. "What?! We didn't do anything! I didn't do anything! How could you just accept that?!"

"Smoker gave Headquarters some...choice words," Hina fought back a small laugh.

"I told them to eat shit," Smoker handwaved it. "The point is, it is easier to cover up a story without something like a giant woman making potential headlines. As such, a Vice Admiral has been dispatched to our area to review the situation and take whatever action he deems necessary."

The young Marine's eyes widened. "A Vice Admiral?! It could be a massacre! I believe that the Straw Hats deserve to be brought to justice...but not like this! Not after risking their lives for this country...for us!"

As she was saying that, another thought crept into her mind. "And what about the children?! A Vice Admiral isn't going to make the distinction of innocent children on a pirate ship!"

"Welcome to the conversation Tashigi. These are the exact issues the two of us have been discussing," Smoker practically bit down on his cigar. "So, any thoughts?"

"Do you at least know WHICH Vice Admiral is coming?" Tashigi took off her glasses, still trying to take everything in.

"For something this high profile? We are getting the hero of the Marines himself: Vice Admiral Garp."

# The Near-Ending Carnival

The sight of rain brought tears to the eyes of Igaram, the official captain of Alabasta royal guard. It had been a rough couple of weeks for the blond, curly-haired man. His infiltration of Baroque Works had been found out by two of the most heinous Agents in the organization, Miss Valentine and Mr. 5, and was reduced to placing the safety of Princess Vivi in the hands of pirates he had tried to kill earlier that day. To make matters worse, his ship was destroyed by another Agent: Miss Allsunday.

Yet he endured.

Though it took far longer than he hoped, he followed the Eternal Pose all the way back to his beloved Alabasta only to find much of the country in a state of panic. The Marines had been brought in and were seemingly assisting the people, but it was not enough for Igaram. He needed to know that the princess was safe and that Crocodile's ambitions had been thwarted.

Then the rain began and it was beautiful. Finally, after all of these years, rain poured down on his country. It was truly a sight to behold. As he took in the beauty, he passed a Marine procession taking several prisoners away from Alubarna, including two people that he recognized as the "Mr. 4 Pair," which amazed him. Could this be the sign he was waiting for? Could his country be returned to its natural state?

Upon finally reaching Alubarna, he became overwhelmed at the sight of several people he recognized. The pirates were there, dancing around in merriment over their apparent victory, Chaka and Pell were talking to a young girl that he swore he knew from somewhere, and there, talking with her father, was Vivi. She was safe and sound, finally free from Crocodile's attempted assassinations. The mission was over: Alabasta was free.

"Princess!" he called to her.

"Igaram!?" Vivi ran over to him, embracing the man with a powerful

hug. "I thought you were dead!"

"My dear, I am just fine! She only blew up my ship, not me. I..." Igaram started to elaborate on his survival before laying eyes on two of the people celebrating with the pirates. "RUN PRINCESS! ALLOW ME TO TAKE CARE OF THESE ROGUES!"

The shouting from Igaram caused everyone to stare at him. The two people in question, the former Miss Valentine and Mr. 5, looked at him as if to recall who he was exactly. It was the blonde who recognized him first.

"Oh my god; it's the captain of the royal guard," she whispered, causing Mr. 5 to lose all of the color in his face.

"Crap."

"It's okay Igaram!" Vivi tried to diffuse the situation. "They are on our side now! Look at them; they have been fighting for us since Whiskey Peak!"

It was true, they both looked like hell, especially Miss Valentine. She was battered, bruised, and was barely standing on her own. Mr. 5, however, looked a lot better, but still had bruises on his face. Still, the question of WHY these two had helped to save Alabasta when they had been sent to kill them was gnawing at his mind.

"...I...I don't understand."

"Mr. Captain of the Guard," Miss Valentine began. "I know it is hard to believe, and it sounds rather...well cliché ...but we've realized that Crocodile was manipulating our hopes and dreams at your expense...and that..."

"Dear god, Petrea. Please don't go into that pouting, self-hating attitude of yours again! You've done that enough!" Mr. 5 shook his head. "I doubt you will forgive the two of us...Igaram, right? But it's true. We helped bring down our old boss and partners. I mean, look at her! She's been through hell and back...AND DON'T YOU SAY IT IS PENANCE OR SOME CRAP!"

Igaram did not know entirely what to make of this. He could see the

pain that Miss Valentine (or, he supposed, Petrea) endured and he knew that it was not a pain that could easily be faked. Again, what caused them to defect was beyond him, but if Vivi was vouching for them despite everything Baroque Works did to her country, who was he to judge?

"If you two have truly risked your life for Alabasta, for the princess, then you have my thanks and eternal gratitude," Igaram extended his hand for them to shake. The former Mr. 5 stared at it and shook it firmly with a smile.

"Thanks...and sorry for the whole trying to kill you thing. Orders...you understand," he shrugged his shoulders, trying to play it off coyly.

Before he could get a chance to respond, Igaram was surrounded by the rest of the Straw Hat pirates, including Straw Hat Luffy himself. "HEY! IT'S THAT GUY! YOU'RE ALIVE!"

"But we saw him get blown up..." the thief Nami responded. "How is this possible?!"

"Dude, I was just saying today that I thought you were alive! Shishishi!" Luffy laughed. "This is great! That means Robin really isn't that bad after all!"

"Robin?" Nami asked. "What are you talking about?"

"I'll tell you later!"

She shook her head and sighed. "That's doubtful. Regardless, as much as I love the rain, I feel like I'm gonna pass out. What do you say, Vivi? Can we crash in the palace for a bit?"

"It would be my pleasure," Vivi smiled. "Come on everyone! Let's get settled and maybe have a feast to celebrate!"

"FEAST?!" Luffy clapped his hands. "YAY!"

"Sleepover!" a young boy joined in the clapping. "I'm so excited! Thank you, Vivi!"

As the pirates entered the palace, Igaram made his way over to his

king, who was surveying the damage done to the land. "King Nefeltari, how are you holding up?"

"Who even knows anymore Igaram," he frowned. "I'll be better once the repairs begin. Alabasta has been hurting for too long. What about you, old friend? It sounds like you have had quite an interesting two years of adventures."

"'Interesting' isn't exactly the word I would use to describe it," he chuckled. "Especially not in comparison to what the princess seems to have gone through. Pirates helping a princess...if I weren't desperate when I asked them to do it, I never would have believed it."

"Then it's lucky that they were in the right place at the right time," Cobra observed. "It appears that fate is looking out for our country after all. Still, let's go inside and relax. I'm sure Terracotta would love to see her husband."

\*AGITR\*

After a light feast with the promise of a banquet the next day, the Straw Hats settled down for a well-deserved rest. The only ones still moving around were Pearl and Garnet, still in possession of Amethyst's gemstone, ever waiting for her to reappear.

"Steven sure has found himself some interesting company," Garnet observed, leaving the sleeping pirates and finding a window to stare out of, looking at the rain.

"They are a particular bunch to say the least," Pearl agreed. "They seem to care enough about him. Still, it doesn't mean I approve of a life of pirating for our boy."

"I don't think these are typical pirates. I get a good vibe from them."

The peach-blond-haired Gem frowned and kept quiet for several minutes. Finally, she started to walk away. "All of this excitement has made me restless...I'm not used to being away from the Temple for this long! I need something to do!"

"Go check out the library," Garnet suggested. "We've still got some

time before the sun rises. It might do us some good to learn more about this world."

Pearl nodded, rubbing her chin as she thought about it. "That's not a bad idea, Garnet. The king did say that we could go anywhere we wanted...is that rude?"

"Nah," Garnet told her. "Go for it, girl."

Making her way through the palace, Pearl took in the sights with awe. The structure was full of history just by its design. It reminded her of the Egyptian palaces on their Earth, which had always fascinated the Gem. She might have believed that humans were fragile, but their creativity could sometimes surpass their physical limitations. Rose had shown her that all those years ago, and it was something that had stuck with her throughout the centuries.

Finally finding the library, Pearl began looking at the various titles on display. Though she was initially drawn to a large history book, another title caught her eye. It was a small book with a very alluring title: *The Devil Fruit Encyclopedia*. "Hello. What do we have here?"

The Gem sat down on a comfy couch and began to read the encyclopedia to herself. It was after at least an hour of reading that a voice called out to her, startling the Gem. "Couldn't sleep, eh?"

It was Vivi's father, Nefeltari Cobra, wearing a nightgown and holding a burning candle. "Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you. Your name is Pearl, right?"

She nodded, clearly frazzled by being found out by the king. "I'm sorry for being here without your permission, Your Highness! I..."

"Please, I already told you that you are my guest...not merely as a king but as a father who is thanking the people who helped rescue his daughter," Cobra chuckled. "So, I see you have taken an interest in Devil Fruits. I swear, no matter how many times I see Devil Fruit users, I will never get used to them. It always surprises me when a new type of fruit makes itself known to the world."

"This encyclopedia is rather in-depth," Pearl acknowledged the

book, continuing to flip through it. "But I haven't reached anything about where Devil Fruits come from."

"That, my dear, is one of the great mysteries of our world. Devil Fruits are a mystery of itself. You never know where one will show up and, unless it has been documented in that encyclopedia, you will not know what ability it will grant you unless you eat it."

The Gem made a face at the thought of eating the disgusting looking fruit. "You would never catch me eating one of those things. They just look so...unappealing."

"I've never had any desire to eat them myself, despite being given the opportunity several times," Cobra acknowledged. "Still, I have to ask...how did you do that trick you did today? The one where you made Crocodile's visage appear over the crowd?"

"Oh, that was from my gem," Pearl smirked, acknowledging the gemstone on her forehead. "You wouldn't understand. It...it makes sense in our dimension."

"Gem,' you say?" the king stared intently at the stone. "Hmm...that reminds me of an old story passed down from the kings of old."

"Oh?" Pearl raised an eyebrow. "And why is that?"

"It...it goes back to ancient legend," he explained. "Of magical stones falling from the sky with strange abilities. It sounds strange, I know."

"Magical stones?" Pearl asked. "Is there any more to this legend?"

"Only that the rocks were manipulated into weapons before blowing up in their owner's faces," Cobra sighed. "It was meant as a warning to know of our limits as a people, but I have learned that people will interpret legends and stories into anything that suits their beliefs if they are paranoid enough." The man sat down beside Pearl and patted her shoulder reassuringly. "Regardless of that, if you like the book, why don't you keep it? I've read it enough."

"Are you sure? I couldn't..." Pearl tried to give the book back, but Cobra refused.



"I insist! By all means, if you'd like any book in the library, please feel free to take them. I'm sure all of this must be fascinating to a dimensional traveler like yourself," Cobra said with a yawn. "Well, I'm going to be going to bed now. I think I'll leave you if you don't mind. If you need anything at all, my door is five rooms down to the left. You should get some sleep too."

"Gems don't..." Pearl sighed. "Good night, Your Majesty." With that, Pearl was all alone with a lot to think about. The story Cobra hinted at itched away at her. If it was just a legend, why did it feel like less of a story and more of a subtle warning? As a king, was Cobra aware of more things than others? The smoking captain and the bespectacled female swordsman didn't say anything about the Gems beyond sheer shock of their abilities.

Could there be people out there who would construe the Gems as a threat purely because of some old fable? And if so...what would they do with them if they got their hands on them?

\*AGITR\*

The following day's banquet was legendary.

Everybody ate to their heart's content, except for Pearl, who refused out of principle. Even Garnet tried a dish or two to fit in. Plate after plate came out and everybody continued to stuff themselves full.

It was a shame that Amethyst still had not regenerated, for she would have appreciated the Alabastan delicacies.

Following the feast, all of the non-Gems were permitted to enjoy a lovely bath in the royal bath house. Steven had never taken a bath like this before and, naturally, was a bit confused by the entire thing.

"So we all take a bath...at the same time?" Steven asked while wearing a towel, looking around the lavish, steamy room.

"Yeah, kiddo," Greg laughed. "Bath houses are popular in many parts of our world too. Marty and I visited one once on a tour...but that one was in a dirtier place with a lot shadier people. The less said about that, the better."

"...whatever you say, dad," Steven decided not to pursue the comment. "I think it's so cool that you have two large bath houses in the palace, Mr. Nefeltari!"

Cobra merely started at him, trying to figure out what he was talking about. "Steven, we only have one bath house. This is it."

The boy looked around curiously at the giant room and gave a confused look. "...but then where are the girls?"

"A damn good question Steven!" Sanji added.

"NO! NO, IT IS NOT!" Igaram interjected.

"Oh, it's right over that wall," Cobra pointed to the center of the room.

At once, all of the men (save Steven) started to run for the barrier until they were halted by Greg himself, who forced himself between them and the wall.

"Woah! Hold it! You guys are NOT doing that! No way!" Greg scolded them.

"But...but Nami-san..." Sanji started to drool.

"Need I remind you blockheads that the painter girl and Connie are over there?! There is no way I'm going to let that happen!" Greg slapped his face in frustration. "Besides, this is not acceptable behavior for Steven to pick up!"

The Straw Hats looked to one another before sighing like school children being sent to the principal's office. Sanji turned around to make one last attempt, but Greg simply waved his finger in disappointment.

On the other side of the wall, the ladies in question were having their own interesting conversation.

"So, have you guys decided what you want to do yet?" Nami asked her companions. "We are going to have to set sail soon before the Marines start really hassling your country for harboring fugitives."

"I...it's complicated," Vivi started. "I really don't know what I should do."

"A princess as a pirate," Genevieve smirked. "That's funny. Say, can you hand me that washcloth?"

Vivi looked at the washcloth that was right in front of the girl, which would require far more movement from Vivi to reach it. Still, she couldn't help but laugh to herself as she handed it over.

"What about you two?" Nami focused on her reformed friends. "Now that Baroque Works is finished, you guys are in the clear. I know Damian was rather insistent that you didn't want to be pirates when this all started, but..."

The blonde chocolatier, who was still bandaged but was moving around a lot better thanks to the combined efforts of Chopper and Alabasta's finest doctors, exchanged a look with the brunette painter, who shrugged. "I honestly never thought about it...I mean, what use would you guys even have for a chocolate maker when you have Sanji?"

"Well, for starters, you make better dessert than Sanji does," Nami pointed out. "Besides, who cares if there are two cooks on the ship? Do you see the way Luffy eats?"

"Kyahahaha! You have a point there...still, I don't know..." Petrea sat and thought about it. "Genevieve?"

"I dunno. Maybe?" she shrugged. "You guys seem to get into enough interesting situations that could make a heck of a great painting."

"I wish I could join you guys!" Connie exclaimed, causing everyone to acknowledge the one girl who didn't really have a choice in the matter. "To be a pirate...it's such an enjoyable adventure! I'd love to cross cutlasses with other pirates and find treasure all while living by the pirate code!" The girl started to work herself up before sighing, accepting the reality of her situation. "Still, I know my mom would ground me for life if I never came back...and she'd definitely use the abacus."

"...abacus?" Nami asked. "Your mom uses an abacus...to ground you? That seems excessive."

"I know!"

"So, when will you guys go back?" Petrea asked. "I mean, if you got here, does that mean you can use Steven's stone thing to get back to your home?"

The girl frowned. "I don't know about that...but we have the Belly Bag Badge that Uncle Grandpa gave to us! All we have to do is click the button on the back of it once and we will get sent back to his van."

The girls were silent, trying to take in the odd terminology. "I have just one question," Vivi asked.

"Just one?" Genevieve chuckled.

"Sure. What is it?" Connie asked, ignoring Genevieve.

"...what's a 'van?'"

\*AGITR\*

Later that night, the sleeping Straw Hats were awoken rather suddenly when Igaram and the Gems came running into the room. Though half-asleep, they all could see a look of fear and panic on their faces.

"How could we have let this happen?! How could we have posed for it?!" Pearl was wailing. "This is terrible!"

"I don't know, Pearl," Garnet was keeping cool. "It's kind of cool that we left such an impact here."

"ARE YOU INSANE?!" the Gem grabbed Garnet and started to shake her. "WE ARE NOW WANTED CRIMINALS!"

"Hey, keep it down!" Zoro groaned. "Can't a guy get some sleep around here?"

Wiping his eyes awake, Steven barely comprehended the screaming going on around him. "...Pearl? What's going on?"

"You are all in great danger!" Igaram threw four papers onto the floor of the room they were all sharing. "Look at these!"

Crawling out of bed, the pirates and dimensional travelers marveled at an incredible sight: new bounty posters. Four familiar faces adorned them:

**"Straw Hat" Monkey D. Luffy: 100,000,000 Berries.**

**"Pirate Hunter" Roronoa Zoro: 60,000,000 Berries.**

**"Tiger Millionaire" Steven Universe: 40,000,000 Berries.**

**"Giant Onigiri Magician" Sardonyx: 80,000,000 Berries.**

"Gah! My son is a wanted man!" Greg freaked out. "I FAILED AS A FATHER! WHAT DO WE DO?!"

"...wait, I have a bounty?" Steven tried making sense of it. "How did they even get my picture?"

"Shishishi! This is great! You had your picture taken when we dropped off Crocodile, bro! And it's so high too!" Luffy laughed. "But not as high as mine!"

"Hmm...not bad," Zoro rubbed his chin in admiration. "Still should be higher."

"Look! I'm in the picture!" Usopp pointed to a small, blurry image in the corner of Luffy's bounty. "I'm going to be famous!"

"...I don't see it," Garnet mused.

"Wait, why does this shithead and the kid get bounties while I'm neglected again?!" Sanji fumed. "This is horseshit!"

"This isn't a time to be happy or jealous!" Nami scolded him. "Higher bounties mean that more people will be gunning for our heads!"

"Exactly!" Igaram exclaimed worriedly. "You three are now going to be known to the people in the know as the ones to bring down a Shichibukai! We aren't going to be able to protect you here for much longer!"

"How can we be seen as a criminal?!" Pearl was still bemoaning. "We brought down a criminal! We should be seen as heroes! We shouldn't even be here! We...!"

"Um...does it really matter?" Usopp asked weakly. "I mean, you two aren't actually wanted; only your fusion is."

"YES, IT REALLY MATTERS!"

"Pearl's hysterics aside, the captain of the guard is right. You all are in danger of being captured by the Marines, and you risk being charged for treason against your government for harboring fugitives," Garnet pointed out. "We will see you off safely before we leave ourselves."

"Aww, Garnet, do we have to go?" Steven gave the Gem his puppy-dog eyes. "You guys only just got here! We still can go on so many more adventures and..."

"Steven, listen to me carefully," Garnet bent down and put her hand on his shoulder. "You have experienced things and met people that others have only dreamed of. You have helped restore peace to a kingdom and brought joy back to so many people's lives. But you have to remember: this is not your home. These are not your people. Think about Beach City. Think about Peridot and Malachite."

"But what about you?!" Steven yelled, as all eyes on the room were on him, silent and still. "You guys left Homeworld, your home, to protect the Earth! Why can't we help them the same way?!"

"Because there is no denying the beauty and the worth of this dimension. Homeworld only saw Earth as a colony...as a pest. Your mother saw it differently and because of her, humanity was allowed to flourish. These people don't have that problem. There already exist Crystal Gems here...and you have been traveling with them the entire time."

"She's right, sport," Greg, who finally calmed down, came over and joined his son. "There are a lot of people worried about you who care about you. Who's gonna eat at the Big Donut? Who's gonna grab the last fry bits? And what about Connie? What about her parents? I know I was worried sick when you were lost...if something were to happen to Connie, her parents would never know. Do...do you understand, son?"

The boy just sat there, taking everything in. He looked to his crew, who gave him sad, yet understanding looks. This was a very important moment for Steven, and he knew it. "I once heard a saying...about carnivals...how they are only around for a short amount of time...that they come and go," Steven fumbled a bit. "But...carnivals always come back, right? If you wait awhile, they'll come back!"

He stood up and looked to all of his friends. "I...we have to go back home. I don't know how it will happen or when, but I know I will see you all again! No matter what, I will always be a Straw Hat! I will always consider you all my nakama...my best friends! If I find a way to come back to visit...would...would...?"

"OF COURSE, YOU BIG DUMMY!" Luffy started to cry. "WE WILL ALWAYS BE FRIENDS!"

"That was very well-spoken, Steven," Garnet smiled.

"Why are you idiots always so emotional?!" Damian started to weep uncontrollably. "That was beautiful! Absolutely beautiful!"

"You said it, man!" Usopp nodded.

"...you never would have guessed that he was once a feared assassin," Igaram whispered to himself, actually seeing the true emotions of the Baroque Works Agent for the first time and not going by the words of his princess. He coughed for a moment, forcing the attention to be directed back to him. "What will you all do now? Your ship will no doubt be targeted by the Marines before you leave..."

"Give us an hour and we will figure out something," Nami reassured

him, glancing over to Vivi, who was shifting in her seat. "You shouldn't be here...plausible deniability and all..."

The man nodded and left them alone to reflect on the intense, emotional moment and the wild worries of Pearl. After a moment, Vivi finally gathered the courage to speak. "Guys, I don't know what to do...I really want to come with you! I want to sail and..."

"Twelve hours," Nami cut her off. "We can give you twelve hours. With luck, our ship hasn't been discovered back at the Sandora River. We will cut around and pass by the East Coast! We can't stop there...but if you have made up your mind to travel with us, then we'd gladly take you! Just make sure you realize what that will mean for your people and your country. You will be a pirate from that moment on. Do you understand?"

Vivi nodded as everyone let the moment simmer. Unspoken, the Straw Hats returned to their beds one by one to allow Vivi the proper time to reflect to herself while Garnet led Pearl out of the room to try to calm her down. The only one to stop to her was Steven, who gave her a hug and whispered in her ear. "No matter what you choose, helping you really has been like a fun carnival!" With that, he went to bed, trying to get some sleep before the big day.

Though she didn't realize it yet, the young boy had just helped the princess make up her mind about what she would have to do the next day. It was a choice she knew deep down she had to follow, but one that she selfishly hoped that she wouldn't have to make. But Vivi was always a selfless person at heart and, in the end, she would have made this choice even without his push. It was just in her nature.



# The Escalating Day

When Vivi woke up the following morning, she soon realized that she was all alone. In hindsight, it made sense. This would allow her to make a clean break from them if that was her wish. Of course, this was the last thing that Vivi wanted, but she knew she had to do what was best for everyone.

As she prepared herself, she was reminded countless times by Igaram that, regardless of everything, she had a responsibility as the princess to address the people in their time of need. It was simple enough, but she had so many things on her mind that it was hard to keep track of everything. How would she approach such a difficult topic in a way that offered resolution to her people?

In the end, Vivi realized that the simplest way was to tell her story: the princess who met kind people throughout time and space, with abilities that went beyond her comprehension, and who had the capacity to put aside differences in order to do the right thing. These were the things she would always take away from her time with the Straw Hats. Why couldn't it be the same for the people of Alabasta?

The trick was to do it in her own way...a way to reach not only her people, but to the people she wanted to reach the most. It was only after spying Igaram coming in to check on her that Vivi realized that she had the perfect idea in mind...though Igaram would hate her for it.

\*AGITR\*

"There she is! The Going Merry!" Luffy announced to the Crystal Gems, Connie, Greg, and Lion. Though they had considered themselves to be temporary pirates, it was the first time they had ever laid eyes on their ship.

"This is your ship?! I love it! It's so cute!" Connie squealed.

"...it's not very big, is it?" Pearl frowned. "I don't know if it could sustain any of our fusions' weights...but it seems durable enough..."

"It's got style," Garnet gave a thumbs up as she patted the hull.

"Is nobody going to ask why the figurehead is a sheep? I can't be the only one thinking it," Greg asked.

Usopp leaned in and started to whisper some backstory to Greg, who nodded as he comprehended everything. "Really? Eh, some pirate ships have mermaids; others have sheep. Still, this is where you have been hanging, Steven? Not bad!"

"We'll give you the tour when we leave!" Luffy announced. He started looking around, as if he were waiting for someone. "Hmm...I could have sworn she would have been here..."

"Luffy, you know Vivi isn't supposed to meet us here, right?" Nami reminded him. "There's no reason for you to be looking for her."

He frowned and started muttering something about wishing that "she" was supposed to be here. Nami realized there was no point in pursuing the matter and decided to be the one to state the obvious question that was on half of their minds. "Okay, we have been here now for at least four days. There is absolutely no way the Marines would have not found our ship by now. Where the hell are they?"

"It's possible they are too busy dealing with a high profile criminal like Crocodile," Genevieve offered.

"Good point, but now that this numbskull got his bounty raised so much, we have BECOME high profile criminals," Sanji shook his head. "The things we go through for beautiful women."

"Maybe it's because..." Steven started to say before getting cut off.

"Don't say that it's because 'Tashigi is nice' or something like that," Zoro groaned. "God, I hate her!"

"But she IS nice! You just need to spend more time with her!" he argued in her defense.

"Ha!" he snorted. "Like hell I will!"

"Damn it!" Nami cried before Steven could object about the

language. "I just remembered something very important!"

"What?" Usopp asked. "What is it?"

"I never collected the fee from Igaram for rescuing Vivi from these two morons!" she slapped her head. "I missed out on so much money!"

"ARE YOU SERIOUS?!" the rest of the crew yelled at her. "HAVE YOU NO SHAME?!"

"That's the most pirate-like thing that I have encountered here so far," Greg observed.

"Can we talk as we sail?" Damian shifted uneasily. "I've got a bad feeling about this and I don't...kid, why are you smirking like an idiot?"

Steven couldn't control himself. "Nothing! Just...just something you said that reminded me of something!"

"...I love you, kid...but I just don't get you sometimes," Damian shook his head.

"So you guys are coming with us?" Chopper asked excitedly. "That's great!"

"At least to see Steven off," Petrea corrected him. "After that is up in the air. Do you mind?"

"Keep making that chocolate of yours and you can stay as long as you'd want!" Luffy laughed.

"Aw, you guys don't have to!" Steven blushed. "Wouldn't you want to start a chocolate shop or something here?"

"Not my kind of place," she smiled. "The heat would just keep melting the chocolate."

"Ah," he nodded. "I understand."

With that, the crew boarded the ship, ready to set out to potentially

meet Vivi with seemingly little to no obstacles. Amazingly, nobody seemed to notice the small ear hidden on the side of the boat listening to their conversation.

\*AGITR\*

The princess found herself at peace when she finally began her speech. She had put her heart and soul into writing it, and she knew that she wanted to make every word count. Chaka, Pell, Igaram, Terracotta, her father, Kohza, Toto, the rebels, the soldiers, and even her father...she knew they would all be listening. They knew what had transpired in the country, even if it would be covered up by the government to save face. They knew the struggles and sacrifices that went into this conflict. They earned their peace, but she would not be saying goodbye to them just yet.

As such, this message was intended for a different kind of farewell.

"It was not that long ago that I went on a journey...a journey that left me from my kingdom for two long years. During that time, I grew older and experienced the world for what it was. The world was and truly is an amazing sight to behold," Vivi began. "It was so hard to take in at first, for this kingdom was all that I knew, and it frightened me."

She paused for effect and then continued. "But even in the darkest of storms a light will often find its way through, shining its hopefulness as a proud beacon. My beacon was found on a small ship that saved me from the turbulent storms of the world...the storms that I couldn't overcome on my own. Heh," she chuckled to herself. "It might sound like a metaphor to you all, but to me, it's as real as the rain that only just stopped a few short hours ago. And in the end, isn't that what matters the most?"

As she was saying these words, a small ship appeared not to far from her, beginning to sail away. She knew they had to be confused. She was using a Den Den Mushi to give her speech off the side of a cliff near the coast to give the illusion she was speaking at the palace. Of course, the Vivi seen at the palace was merely Igaram in drag, but really, who didn't want to see that? As such, it was time to direct the speech to the people she wanted to reach the most.

She put down the speaker and called out to them. "I'M OVER HERE! HEY!"

"QUAAAACK!" Carue joined in, waving frantically.

"It's Vivi!" she swore she heard Chopper cry out with joy.

"I KNEW VIVI-CHAN WOULDN'T LET US DOWN!" she definitely heard Sanji yell.

'This is it...the moment of truth...' she sighed to herself, knowing full well that she was doing the right thing. "I...I CAN'T COME WITH YOU!"

She picked up the speaker to explain herself to the crew who was no doubt sobbing. "I want to come with you more than anything! I loved our time together! I loved the snowmen and singing, the parties and the recklessness, the highs and the lows...I will cherish and treasure every memory I have of this time...but I just really love this country!"

She finally said it, and by doing so a weight was lifted off of her chest. This was one of the hardest moments of her life, and she wished more than anything that she could have just one more day with them, one more day on that ship full of pirates, swordsmen, assassins, dimensional travelers, aliens, and liars...

"But I need to know..." Vivi asked while tears streamed down her face. "If the carnival does come back...even though I have chosen to stay here...WILL WE STILL BE FRIENDS?!"

She waited for a moment for a response, fearing that there would be none. Finally, on the deck of the ship she loved, she saw a beautiful sight: her friends raising up their arms in silence to display what was under the cloth arm bands: an "X." It was a powerful moment for the princess and the duck, who returned the gesture as they waved goodbye to their friends, taking solace in what that moment really meant:

*"This will be a symbol of our eternal friendship!"*

\*AGITR\*

The mood on the Going Merry was rather sour indeed. All of the pirates were sad to see Vivi go, despite knowing that it was the most likely outcome. Everybody was very depressed, sitting down on the deck trying not to cry and barely acknowledging the emptiness of the sea around them.

Everybody except Genevieve and, unsurprisingly, Zoro.

"...you guys can't seriously still be moping about this, are you?" he sighed. "If you wanted her to stay, why didn't you kidnap her or something? It would have given her a good alibi to stay with us."

"And given you a giant target on your back," Garnet pointed out, walking by as she admired the ship. "And I don't mean those marks on your arms either."

"How could you be so cruel, Zoro?!" Chopper yelled at him.

"Have you no heart?" Steven was bawling. "She was our friend!"

"She was so nice to me!" Connie joined in.

"SHE FORGAVE ME!" Petrea yelled to the heavens.

The blond chef jumped down to Zoro and grabbed his shirt. "Damn moss-head! Look at what you've done!" Sanji yelled angrily. "You made Petrea-chan cry. I hope you are happy about that!"

"...she cries any time she talks about her Baroque Works past," Genevieve, who was snacking on a rice cracker that she restocked when she was in Alabasta, rolled her eyes. "You can't really blame that on him."

"What do you know about that?! You mean to tell me you aren't feeling ANYTHING about Vivi leaving?" Petrea snapped defensively.

"I'm crying on the inside," she pouted. "It's been a long week!"

"Your laziness never ceases to astound me," Usopp shook his head. "I swear it."

"I'm glad I continue to be a constant source of entertainment in your

life," Genevieve smirked.

"...it's time, isn't it?" Steven asked gently. Upon entering the ship, he had made sure to keep his trusty Cheeseburger Backpack close to him with the Rifting Stone inside. The boy was now clutching it like a security blanket. His father frowned and joined his son sitting down on the deck. "Do we have to say goodbye now?"

"That's up to the Gems, champ," Greg shrugged. "They've got to make that call."

He found Pearl and Garnet's eyes, who had stopped looking around to acknowledge the boy. The Gems gave a small nod to each other and, just as Garnet was going to respond, they saw the faces of all of the crew. Practically all of them were giving them puppy-dog eyes, silently begging them not to leave yet. It was clear that losing Vivi and Steven in the same hour was too much to bear. "...they are staring at us Garnet," Pearl whispered. "Make them stop! It's embarrassing."

She nodded. "Steven!" she yelled. The crew jumped, not expecting the soft spoken Garnet to yell so loudly. "I have made a decision! Pirates are known for several things, most of them reprehensible!"

"Hey!" Luffy, Usopp, and Chopper shouted back.

"However, I hear that you all can throw a good party," she started to smile. "Let's see if you can live up to that reputation, Pirate Captain Luffy."

"What?!" Pearl jumped back.

Stars filled Steven's eyes as he stared at his guardians with joy. "Do you mean it?!"

"Really?!" Luffy grinned from ear to ear. "You mean it?!"

"Yeah," Garnet nodded. "Crystal Gems love to party."

The boy started to jump up and down with Connie, who was just as excited to stay on a pirate ship. "We get to stay one more night! Woohoo!"

"YAY! ONE MORE NIGHT! ONE MORE NIGHT!" Chopper, Usopp, Luffy, and Damian chanted energetically.

"If we are having a party for such fine ladies, then I know just what we need...the finest meal the greatest chef on the Grand Line can prepare," Sanji adjusted his shirt, opening the door to the kitchen before having it opened for him. "Oh, thank you!"

"You won't be thanking me much longer, pirate scum," a gruff voice responded. "This party was over before it began."

Before Sanji could respond with a kick, he was punched in the face by an unseen hand. The chef flew backwards. Immediately the crew got defensive, worried by who could possibly be in the kitchen. That fear got worse when the distinctive smell of cigars filled the air.

Putting away his lighter, Smoker and Tashigi sauntered out onto the deck. They were completely surrounded and they knew it, but it confirmed Nami and Zoro's concerns: the Marines had been keeping tabs on the Going Merry.

"Smokey?!" Luffy started to freak out. "Why are you on my ship?!"

"Get back, Pirate Captain Luffy!" Garnet formed her gauntlets as Pearl formed her spear. She set down Amethyst's gem, which Greg ran over to get, talking to the stone in the hopes of getting her to come back to life. "We will defend the ship for you!"

"Get in line!" Zoro went for his swords, before Steven started waving his arms.

"Wait! Wait! Guys, stop the fighting! This isn't right!" he pleaded to his friends and to the Marines. "Why can't we hear them out?!"

"Because he just hit Sanji in the face!" Damian started cracking his neck and knuckles, ready to join the fight. "That's my job!"

"They are obviously here to arrest us while we are down!" Nami scowled. "Typical Marines..."

"If you all would just calm down and shut up, you'll find out exactly WHY I'm here!" Smoker yelled to everyone. "Listen; against my



better judgment and my earlier vow, I'm not going to arrest you unless you decide not to cooperate with me. This is a very important situation and we do not have any time to argue!"

"What the hell does that mean?" Sanji asked, rubbing his face while getting up. "You'd rather us surrender or some shit?"

"HOW DID YOU GET ON MERRY?!" Luffy jumped down and marched up to Smoker. "YOU DID NOT GET PERMISSION TO BE ON MY SHIP!"

"I'm a Marine you idiot," Smoker looked down at him, not intimidated at all by his presence. "I am supposed to be where criminal scum like you gather to bring you to Justice. Why do you think there haven't been Marines following you? Tashigi and I have been on board your ship since about an hour before you arrived. My ship is in the care of a colleague, who will meet up with us when our little matter here has concluded."

"I know we all have reasons to hate each other, and trust me, we do," Tashigi narrowed her glance at Zoro. "But the fact of the matter is, you are all in danger and we aren't happy about it."

"WHAT?!" everyone yelled at the same time.

"Why the hell would you care if we were in danger?!" Damian folded his arms. "You just called us 'criminal scum' not even a minute ago."

"And I stand by that. However, that does not mean I technically believe that everything my superiors do follows proper Justice," Smoker frowned. "Straw Hat, you assisted my subordinate here back in Alubarna despite repeated requests for you to leave her alone, am I right?"

He nodded, confused but still annoyed by his presence. The others kept watch, waiting for Luffy to give the okay to kick them off of the ship. Steven tried to get a better look of what was going on, but Greg held him and Connie back toward where Lion was watching.

"You shook her up quite a bit, and she was all prepared to avoid arresting you to call it even. But then you handed us every

remaining Baroque Works Agent in the country, leaving the scales of Justice unbalanced. As such, we found ourselves with a problem: what do we do about it?" he continued.

"Let us go?" Usopp offered.

"Begrudgingly, I might consider it...but on one condition and one condition alone. We didn't come here to make peace with you or any crap like that. As long as you wave that damn flag, I will personally make it my life's goal to see you rot in Impel Down or worse! However, the old geezers at Headquarters are making this rather hard for us to simply sit by. First, they went and gave the kid and the giant woman bounties, who I know for a fact was a 'fusion' between two of your Gems..." he acknowledged the two aliens. He paused and looked for the third. "Weren't there three of you?"

Greg held up the gemstone and pointed to it. "Um, she kind of got hurt and retreated back into her gem. Even I have to say she's been in there for a while..."

"Whatever," the Marine handwaved it. "Back to the matter at hand, giving you all bounties was just the cherry on top of an ice cream cone of shit. I don't know why they are targeting you all beyond the fact you took down Crocodile, but they haven't stopped at overly high bounties. No, they decided to send a Vice Admiral after you!"

"A VICE ADMIRAL?!" Petrea, Nami, Damian, Genevieve, and Sanji screamed in fear.

"...what's a 'Vice Admiral?'" Steven asked, continuing to try to make himself known.

The Marine shot a look at Steven's direction and started to walk towards him. "The Vice Admirals are the third highest ranking officers in the Marines, boy. When they come after you, it is not a joke. That's why we are here. Do not get me wrong, pirates deserve to be brought down. However, this is not the place for people like you."

"...wait...what?" Luffy cocked his head. "People like who?"

"Like Steven or those Gems!" Tashigi answered, keeping herself battle ready. "We've come to escort you away from here before the Vice Admiral in question arrives! He might be a Marine hero, but Vice Admirals aren't known for asking question about their targets. The last thing we want is for an innocent like you to become casualties in a war between the Straw Hat pirates and Vice Admiral Gar..."

"YOU ARE NOT TAKING STEVEN AWAY FROM HERE!" Luffy yelled, cutting him off and forcing himself in front of the smoking Marine. "He is going home after we have our party and..."

"Are you even listening to me?! I've been tracking this ship's movements, listening to everything for the past few hours! I know where we are and when you are going to intercept Vice Admiral Garp! You do not have time to argue with me!" Smoker stopped walking and stared him in the eye. "If you value that boy's life at all, let me take him and the others. I can take him to a place where they can go home! I've stored my Billow Raft in your kitchen to keep it out of sight. It is my portable boat that runs on my Devil Fruit powers and it is large enough to fit all of them in it...even the lion," he motioned to the pink creature, who growled defensively at him. "This is hard for me to do, but even I know when...are you even listening to me?"

Luffy, who had been standing his ground and ready to defend his friends with all of his heart, had turned pale. He started to hyperventilate and ran from side to the side of Merry, looking out on the sea with fear in his eyes. "He...he's coming?!"

"I've never seen him act this serious before," Pearl observed. "It's actually kind of refreshing."

"I'd say unsettling," Zoro frowned. "This isn't like him. Not at all."

"You actually know who Vice Admiral Garp is?" Smoker laughed. "I'm impressed. You always took me for an idiot who wouldn't know where water was unless a fight was taking place on it."

"Guys, this is bad!" Luffy announced to his crew. "We have to get out of here now! We can't handle him! He is way too strong!"

"What?" Nami asked, shocked. "Even Luffy is afraid of the famous Marine hero?"

"CAN SOMEONE TELL ME JUST WHAT IS GOING ON?!" Steven wailed. "If everyone is going to talk about taking me places for my safety without talking to me about what I want, I at least deserve to know what is going on! Who is this Garp guy, Luffy? Why should I be taken away?"

"He...he...he is my...my..." Luffy gulped. "My grandpa!"

The entire ship grew silent for a moment as they took in what he said. At once, they all started yelling out, expressing their disbelief at the concept that Luffy, now a well-known pirate captain, had a grandfather so well-renowned to be known as "The Hero of the Marines."

"Are you screwing with me, Straw Hat?!" Smoker asked, completely flabbergasted at the concept that the two were related. "How is that even possible?!"

"Monkey D. Garp...how did we not see it?" Tashigi put her hand over her mouth in shock.

"No! Gramps is the strongest person I know! We can't fight him! Not like this! Not even with the Gems!" Luffy announced.

"Doubt that," Garnet scoffed.

"Well, this is a good thing, right?" Pearl asked hopefully. "We don't need to fight after all. If this is Luffy's grandfather, then I am sure all we have to do is explain the situation to him."

"Oh! I think I see him!" Connie pointed out to a small figure far off in the distance.

In response, Usopp adjusted his sniper goggles as best as he could to see the oncoming ship. It was indeed a Marine vessel with a dog as its figurehead. In fact, even the crow nests were shaped like a dog's house. It was too far away to tell for sure, but Usopp guessed that Garp was indeed on it. It seemed like the kind of vessel a Vice Admiral would ride in. The telltale sign was the "HQ-03" marking.

"That's a Marine ship alright," Usopp called. "What should we do, Luffy?"

"It's his grandfather! Just wave a white flag to let him know that we have no ill intentions," Pearl smiled.

"...you don't get gramps!" Luffy started freaking out. "He tried to kill me multiple times as a kid! We need to leave now and hope he didn't spot us!"

"Which you can do when the kid leaves with me!" Smoker growled. "He won't fire on me! Stop thinking selfishly and think of the boy!"

"...wait, did you say that he tried to kill you?" Petrea asked.

"Repeatedly?" Sanji asked in shock.

"As a child?!" Tashigi was even taken back. "You have to be exaggerating!"

"Yeah," Steven laughed nervously. "It's just a joke! Right? Right?"

"WE HAVE A CANNONBALL INCOMING!" Usopp started to freak out. "GAH!"

"What?!" Nami looked out to where he was pointing to. "I didn't even hear a cannon fire!"

"Gramps is super strong! He can easily toss them with his hands! This is his way of trying to test me or something!" Luffy explained. "Gah! Knowing him that might even be made of that sea stone stuff!"

"HE DID THAT WITHOUT A DEVIL FRUIT?!"

The crew looked on in horror as the object started flying toward them. Before Garnet or Pearl could react, Steven had already summoned his shield. It was larger than any that he had ever created before. Slowly it transformed into a mixture of his bubble and the shield, surrounding the entire ship. The pain was immense and was tearing at the boy's insides. However, one thing was clear: if this was his parting gift to his friends, he would gladly save them no matter what happened. He could always heal later.

"Steven's shield won't be able to hold up if he continues to bombard us with any more cannon fire!" Pearl noted worryingly. "Drop the shield, Steven. We can deflect the cannonballs ourselves!"

"If you did that, you'd be dealing with Marines viewing it as an act of war and not just some way to get Straw Hat's attention!" Smoker grabbed Luffy by the collar, which prompted the others to shift their focus back and forth between Steven, the cannonballs, and their captain. "You idiot! If you had just let me take him away from here, we wouldn't be in this mess!"

"I'd still be in this mess!" Luffy argued. "I refuse to let him go with anyone without you asking his permission!"

"There's no point in arguing now!" Greg yelled. "If you both care for my son's safety, we need to get out of here now before your grandfather kills us! What even is this: a greeting before you start reminiscing about the good old days?!"

"He's got a point, sir," Tashigi added. "I thought this would help..."

"We will talk about this LATER, Tashigi! Right now, we need to make contact with Vice Admiral Garp and tell him to stop firing on us! Where is your Den Den Mushi?"

She looked down to her wrist and looked around for it. A look of worry appeared on her face. "I...I know I had it! Where did it go?!"

"Shit!" Smoker cursed. "For the love of god, tell me you still have that Den Den Mushi we gave you!"

"Why would we keep that when we all know you could have easily used it to eavesdrop on us?!" Nami looked offended. "Do you take us for idiots?!"

"ANOTHER CANNONBALL INCOMING!" Usopp yelled frantically. "WE NEED TO DO SOMETHING GUYS!"

"Maybe it would be better if we just used the Belly Bag Badge now to get out of here before we cause any more trouble!" Pearl suggested. "This is clearly a family squabble that we are escalating purely by being here!"

"You're right, Pearl," Garnet nodded. She turned to the Straw Hats and prepared to break Steven's heart, as much as it killed her.

"Crew...we need to leave now. It has truly been a wonderful time. This was not the kind of goodbye we all were hoping, but it is clear that the longer we stay, the more we potentially impact your lives in a negative way. I hope you all can understand and forgive us."

"You can't just leave us!" Chopper began to wail. "We haven't even said goodbye!"

"What?!" Connie asked in shock. "How can we just up and leave?!"

"Garnet, there has to be another way of doing this...I mean, this will break his heart without a proper goodbye," Greg pleaded with her for his son's sake.

"But at least he'll be alive, Greg!" Pearl told him.

"But will they?!" Greg pointed to the Straw Hats and Marines. "How will Steven ever know that they made it out okay? All he will know is that he left them to be bombarded by Luffy's grandpa, who, if he were here, I'd give a piece of my mind! I get that you don't want to start a national upset or hurt Luffy's family or whatever, but there has to be a better way! If you won't do it for them, do it for Steven!"

Garnet pulled out the small pin that she had been holding onto since this journey began and stared into the disturbing face of Uncle Grandpa that was molded into the back. One touch and they would be whisked back to the U.G.R.V. and then could safely return to Beach City. They could then bubble up the Rifting Stone and maybe, for Steven's sake, try to find a way to get back in touch with this world and the people who lived here.

But despite knowing that doing so would save him, she knew Greg was right. She couldn't take this away from Steven, not without a meaningful farewell. She couldn't abandon the people who had spent the last few weeks taking care of her boy. They earned that much.

Finally, she saw it. Steven was about to lose his strength and the bubble would be popped, leaving them defenseless. If she did not

act now, there would be trouble for everyone. The fire in her soul wanted her to take charge of the situation while the cold reminded her that no matter what happened, it all would be okay. The first time Garnet became whole was based on an accident that became something beautiful. Steven's friendship with these people was an accident, a break from fate, that was something just as beautiful.

Accidents, as it turned out, had a way of bringing people together.

Gambling on the hope that it would bring them safely away, Garnet hit the back of the Belly Bag Badge. However, due to a well timed cannonball strike, she accidentally hit it twice. The Uncle Grandpa face started to move its mouth, startling everyone on the ship, including Steven, who was seconds away from having his strength drained.

**"WARNING! P.C.M. ACTIVATED!"** it announced loudly.

"What the hell is that thing?!" Smoker asked.

"WE ARE GOING TO DIE!" Usopp panicked.

"Uh-oh," Garnet said as the entire bubbled ship, passengers and all, got sucked into the small badge, just as the final cannonball would have struck them.

The Going Merry had left the Grand Line.

\*AGITR\*

Falling from the sky, the Going Merry crashed hard into the sea below. The passengers, from Gems to Marines did everything they could to pick themselves up off the floor.

"What...what happened?" Steven asked weakly. "I...ugh...I don't think I could bubble something that big again."

"Ack! Help! Get Lion off of me! I can't breathe!" Usopp tried to get the pink creature off of his chest, but he was not moving on his own.

"Did we just get saved?" Sanji, the first Straw Hat to get up, helped Usopp and then looked around. He noticed unfamiliar land nearby. "I



don't see Garp anywhere...just land..."

"I think I'm gonna be sick," Petrea went to throw up over the side of the ship.

"How did this ship just survive that drop?" Tashigi asked herself as she collected her bearings.

"Are you okay?! You saved us! You...oh. My. Gosh," Connie, who had just rushed over to Steven's side to check on him, looked out to the land and realized what it was. "Steven...look!"

The boy rubbed his head and blinked. His vision was a bit fuzzy after all of the concentration he put into the shield, but he was starting to see vague shapes. Slowly, it started to come together. They had landed near a beach with a boardwalk built on it. Several shops could be seen from the sea, as could the outlines of houses. But the defining feature was the enormous cliff that miraculously had a giant woman with multiple arms etched into its side.

The sight brought tears to Steven's still-adjusting eyes. "How...how did this happen?"

"How did WHAT happen?!" Smoker yelled, getting up and examining the landscape. "What the hell was that thing?! Where is Vice Admiral Garp?! Where the hell are we?!"

"The Badge...it didn't take us to Uncle Grandpa..." Garnet stared down at the pin, which had closed its eyes and mouth upon arrival.

"...it took us home!" Pearl started bouncing up and down excitedly. "Oh, I'm just thrilled!"

"...home?" Nami started to shake. "You mean...that this...is..."

"Beach City," Genevieve whispered.

The Straw Hats took in what was just said and processed it. "We are in another dimension?!" Luffy shouted.

"...you're joking, right?" Zoro asked. "You have to be joking."

"WE ARE IN ANOTHER DIMENSION!" the rubber man cheered.

"No," Tashigi was shaking her head furiously. "No, I refuse to believe that I am in another dimension with a bunch of pirates! That's not true! That's impossible!"

"It's true!" Steven cried happily. "I'm home! And you guys are here too! This is great! What could possibly make this any better?"

A rustling was heard from the deck. Half-expecting it to be Amethyst reforming, all eyes turned to Greg, who was so engrossed in the sight of his home that he didn't even realize they were staring. Looking for the source of the sound, it was finally revealed to be a hatch opening up from the men's bedroom. However, it was not a man at all. A most familiar woman climbed up onto the deck, wiping herself off when she reached the top.

"Sorry for not coming out sooner. I was waiting for the commotion to end. Hiding myself in the men's quarters when the Marines arrived wasn't part of the plan at all, but neither was this it seems," Nico Robin asked, taking in the view and ignoring the shocked and angry looks around her. "It seems like I missed quite a bit. I knew there would be fun by throwing out your pesky Marine Den Den Mushi as you boarded the ship, but I wasn't expecting anything this exciting. Anyone want to catch me up? Monkey D. Luffy? Steven Universe?"

As the ship descended into panic at the sight of a third stowaway, Steven reflected on the current moment. Somewhere inside of him, he tried to process just at what point the worst day of his life turned into the best day. After a moment, he decided to forget trying to figure it out and accept the truth:

He was home...and he wasn't alone.

# The Reluctant Handshake

Ronaldo Fryman was on a mission.

After being wrangled by his father to close their restaurant, Beach Citywalk Fries, the paranoid conspiracy theorist noticed a most interesting sight: the sun, which was going down, suddenly returned back into the sky like it was noon. Looking around the pier, it dawned on him that nobody else seemed to realize this unnatural phenomenon.

After a short investigation, Ronaldo realized that the sun had indeed returned back to its intended spot as if nothing happened. He could only describe it as...well...

Weird.

Fortunately, when things turned weird in Beach City, Ronaldo knew exactly who was responsible: the Crystal Gems. Steven, who was still missing, was typically his main connection to the magical women. As such, when he knocked on Steven's door, he knew it was a long shot that they would answer...which they didn't. Without them, it fell to Ronaldo himself to figure out why this had happened and whether it and Steven's disappearance were connected.

Oh, and how the Great Diamond Authority fit into all of it.

All night long, Ronaldo worked to crack the code, but he had nothing to show for it. By the late hours of the morning, he was anticipating his father coming to remind him about work. He knew that the investigation would be put on hold and, with his younger brother Peedee, stopped one final time at Steven's house before his shift on the off chance the magicians were in their creepy temple thing.

As expected, there was no answer. But just as the Fryman brothers started to head to work, another incredible sight occurred before their eyes: a pirate ship fell out of the sky not far from Beach City. The two were flabbergasted at this seemingly random occurrence, but Ronaldo knew the truth: this was the key to getting all of his answers.

Now he and Peedee just had to get them to land...

\*AGITR\*

"What in god's name is she doing here?!" Smoker pointed his jute at Nico Robin. It was a reaction shared by everybody on board, save for Steven (who genuinely enjoyed Robin's company) and Luffy (who was expecting her).

"How rude to point weapons at a lady like that," she chuckled. A moment later, hands sprouted from Smoker's arm, caught off-guard by her ability before he could turn to smoke, which grabbed the weapon and tossed it into the ocean. At the same time, she did the same to Tashigi, Zoro, and Pearl, though she spared their weapons a watery grave. "Didn't they teach you anything at the academy?"

"You caught me off-guard once, witch," he growled, beginning to turn to smoke in anger. "You won't get lucky twice!"

"I already did. Remember your little Den Den Mushi?" Robin smiled. "I couldn't risk you all doing something impulsive..."

"How dare you?! You almost got us killed!" Smoker roared.

"I agree with Captain Smoker!" Usopp shouted through a megaphone that he grabbed. "Baroque Works assassins have no place on this ship...present company excluded!" He looked to a now angry Petrea, Damian, and Genevieve, who were giving him a death glare.

"Why were you even on this ship?!" Nami boldly demanded. "I can see why Smoker is here, though I hate to accept it, but there is no logical..."

"I invited her!" Luffy clapped happily. "I was worried you were going to say no, Robin!"

"WHAT?!" the Straw Hats and Marines yelled in unison.

"ARE YOU INSANE?!" Damian pointed to Robin, who merely smiled. "SHE WAS THE HIGHEST RANKING BAROQUE WORKS MEMBER FOR A REASON!"

"Who is she?" Chopper asked.

"She tried to kill Igaram!" Nami cried out.

"She sent us into a banana gator pit!" Petrea locked eyes with her.

"She kidnapped Vivi's father!" Usopp added through the megaphone.

"Straw Hat, she practically slaughtered my men in Alabasta!" Tashigi yelled in anger, shifting her eyes from the woman to her swords.

"She deserves no mercy at all!"

"She ruined our one chance to talk to Vice Admiral Garp before getting sent to this hellhole!" Smoker bit down on his cigars. "That's not even counting the crimes she committed throughout her life!"

"It's that beautiful angel from the tomb! My dreams have been answered!" Sanji started to fawn over the sight of her.

"...Connie, I suggest we stay out of this," Greg whispered, slowly backing toward the Gems. Pearl was angry beyond all belief at the presence of another criminal, especially since she was now in her home dimension. Garnet, however, looked bemused and alternated between watching the situation unfold while glancing fondly at the temple in the distance.

"What about Steven?" Connie pointed to the boy, who had ran up and hugged Robin. Greg, for his part, kept himself together rather well all things considered.

"GAH! STEVEN, STAY AWAY FROM THE APPARENT MURDERER!" he panicked.

"You're here too! This is amazing! So we are crew mates now?!" Steven was saying, ignoring his father's pleas.

"So it seems," Robin smiled, allowing a small hug before letting go.

"Step away from the boy!" Tashigi warned.

"Woah! Woah!" the boy put his arms out around her. "We all need to

calm down and..."

"Kid, you don't get it! She has had a bounty on her head since she was younger than you! She is personally responsible for blowing up several Marine ships and for countless murders and crimes that she committed for over twenty years!" Smoker prepared to strike Robin with everything he had. "I'm going to say this once: move now so I can deliver proper Justice!"

"If you touch her you will deal with me, Smokey!" Luffy started to get mad now. "If I say she's nice, then she's nice!"

"Even if she were a saint I wouldn't give a damn!" Smoker was moments away from starting a brawl on the ship. "You are a pirate! She is a criminal! Even if she were to join up with you, I would still hunt you all down!"

"That's enough! I'll handle this!" Garnet finally said in a fierce tone, causing the panicking and tension to pause. All eyes were on her, the fierce warrior who stood toe to toe with Crocodile, as she eyed up the stowaway. She looked tiny compared to Garnet's towering height. "You. Tell me your name."

"Nico Robin."

"Good. Now state your dream."

"My dream?" Robin blinked, not expecting to have to answer that question. "My dream is to find the Rio Poneglyph...to learn the True History of the Void Century."

"The Void Century..." Smoker muttered to himself. "That explains a lot..."

"Elaborate," Garnet stopped the interview to acknowledge Smoker. "You seem to know something that we don't."

Giving a glance to Robin, who was starting to get angry, Smoker began his explanation: "Our criminal here is known as the 'Demon Child of Ohara.' She is the only survivor of a country of archaeologists that destroyed itself trying to bring about the end of the world. She personally destroyed six Marine ships before she left

her country to die. If she wants whatever this 'True History' is then it must be to finish their work and to bring down our world as we know it."

"Interesting. I assume you have a response to that," Garnet glanced over to Robin, who had stopped clenching her fists in anger and had adopted a neutral expression.

"Not really. If that's what he says, so be it," she muttered.

"GAH! SHE'S TRYING TO DESTROY THE WORLD!" Usopp yelled. "LUFFY, SHE IS NOT THE KIND OF PERSON WE NEED ON OUR CREW!"

"...you don't seem to be challenging his claims," Garnet pointed out, apparently hoping for a more detailed explanation.

"For now. Anything else you'd like know?" Robin kept her voice easy and neutral.

"Indeed. Tell me your favorite color, Nico Robin."

"...purple," Robin answered, chuckling at the question.

"Ah," she nodded. "It's good, guys. She's cool in my book."

"WHAT?!" everyone on deck shouted at once.

"How was THAT a question to determine if she was trustworthy?!" Zoro shook his head in shock.

"Purple is the color of royalty," Genevieve pointed out. "Makes sense if she'd like to rule the world."

"That doesn't help make anything clearer! In fact, that raises further concerns!" Zoro continued. "There has to be more to than her just accepting Luffy's offer!"

"Why not?" Steven asked.

"...because there just has to be!" Zoro couldn't properly articulate his anger, but kept his eyes on Robin, who found the situation amusing.

"Garnet, what part of that gave you the impression that she ISN'T a murderous anarchist?!" Pearl questioned her leader. "She is clearly a danger to their world and..."

"Their' world, Pearl, not ours," Garnet pointed out. She took the moment to address everyone on the ship at once. "Listen up! It appears that we have been brought back to our home dimension unintentionally. How this has happened, I'm not entirely sure yet. I had pressed the Belly Bag Badge in the hopes it would bring us to Uncle Grandpa's van in order to escape the cannon fire, but we seemed to have bypassed that all together. As such, we have a problem."

The Gem held up the small item and clicked the back, with nothing happening at all. "If I had to wager a guess, I'd say our little badge here wasn't created to withstand sending a ship of this size through dimensional rifts."

"Are you serious?!" Pearl grabbed the badge and started clicking it numerous times frantically. "You can't be serious!"

"I'm afraid so."

"Stop speaking vaguely!" Smoker growled. "What the hell are you talking about?!"

"It means we are stuck here until that thing can be fixed," Nami grabbed the side of Merry, comprehending the seriousness of the situation. "We are stuck in another dimension...with Marines and a woman who tried to kill us."

"I don't recall ever targeting you personally," Robin pointed out.

"You don't get to talk!" Nami whirled around.

"I brought you treasure from Crocodile's private vault," she tossed the girl a bag of jewels. Nami's face lit up like a light bulb and began to examine the treasure excitedly.

"You can talk all ya want, sis!" she giggled uncontrollably.

"...you're hopeless, you know that?" Genevieve rolled her eyes. She



then looked over to Sanji and sighed as he began to flirt with her.

"How did this happen? Why did this happen?" Petrea asked, in awe of the land in front of them that they were steadily approaching.

"I don't care about 'why;' I care about how we can get back!" Smoker sauntered up to Garnet while the Straw Hats started talking among themselves, taking in the fact they were the first pirates from the Grand Line to cross over into a new dimension.

Tashigi, for her part, tripped onto the floor in shock, which the Marine could forgive based on the fantastical situation. Steven ran up to her and tried to help the near hysterical woman. "I wanted to get YOU home, not take all of us for a dimensional road trip!" she cried.

The tall Gem shrugged. "I'm just as in the dark as you. The Badge should have worked. The only other way I can think to get out of this situation is to call Uncle Grandpa."

"Okay, how do we call this person?" Smoker sighed, ready for anything at this point.

"Well..." Pearl put her finger to her chin, trying to think of the best way to explain it. "We need to have a child who is in trouble or is having trouble..."

"Good; we have that covered!" Smoker pointed to Steven, who was tending to Tashigi "We have three children on board a pirate ship filled with criminals. What is next?"

"Um...they need to ask for help?" Pearl offered. "We've only met him twice and the first time was not of the..."

"I don't care! You! Universe!" Smoker called to the boy, ignoring the father who stopped talking to Damian when he heard his last name. "Call your uncle and get him to take us home!"

"It'll be okay, Tashigi! Just wait 'till you try some Fish Stew Pizza! It's...what?" Steven looked up at the Marine and cocked his head in confusion. "My uncle?"

"That's what the woman said!"

"She means Uncle Grandpa, Steven," Pearl clarified.

"Oh!" Steven nodded. "Um...I don't think he has a cell phone."

"What does that mean?!"

"I can't call him?" Steven offered. "This is confusing me!"

"Join the club," Luffy nodded.

"Are you telling me that there is no conceivable way of getting back to the Grand Line?!"

"It appears not," Nico Robin chuckled. "Quite the predicament, isn't it."

"One more word, criminal, and I'll..."

"How am I a criminal exactly? What crimes have I committed in this world?" Robin pointed out. "The World Government has no authority here and, frankly, neither do you, Captain Smoker."

Smoker opened his mouth to argue, but Garnet beat him to it. "She's got you there. Mayor Dewey is the one in charge here. Unless he says otherwise, it looks like you all will have to put aside your differences until we can figure out how to get you home."

The Marine looked at the pirates taking in the sights around him: his subordinate having an anxiety attack on the floor, the most wanted criminal flaunting her presence in his face, and the strange alien women who seemed unable to help him in his plight. Rage seethed inside of him as he took a deep drag of his cigar and chose his words carefully. "...fuck that!"

"Gah! Language! Really bad language!" Steven covered his ears.

"Vulgarity aside, I'm inclined to agree with the Marine," Pearl narrowed her eyes at everyone. "I can't see how this is going to work in any conceivable situation."

"It's going to have to," Garnet folded her arms. "You!" She pointed to the Straw Hats, who jumped. "Be nice to the Marines!" Then she pointed to the Marines. "Be nice to the pirates!" Finally, she pointed to Robin. "Be nice to everyone! If we all can follow that, we will get along just fine while you are here. Now shake hands!"

Luffy, distracted by one of Robin's hands that she had created on the ship's deck to entertain him, Chopper, and Connie, ignored her at first, so Garnet came up to them and started tapping her foot. Robin's hand disappeared with a swirl of cherry blossoms, giving Luffy no other choice but to pay attention. "What did you say?"

"Shake Captain Smoker's hand! You two need to work together if you are going to be in our dimension!" Garnet ordered in a motherly tone.

"Oh, is that it? Okey-Dokey!" He got up and offered his hand to Smoker, smiling as he did it.

The Marine just stared at the hand as if it were a festering wound. He was repulsed to be doing something that went against all of his beliefs. It felt as if he was being cajoled into a no-win situation. However, a thought dawned on him: this allowed him to keep constant tabs on the Straw Hats and to learn more about them. This would allow him to better catch him when they inevitably returned to the Grand Line.

Besides, if he caused any trouble, he could easily take him to this "Mayor Dewey" for the proper punishment suitable for this dimension.

"Fine, Straw Hat...truce," he accepted the handshake. "But remember this: I'll always be watching you."

On Luffy's arm, a third arm sprouted and offered itself to Smoker as well. Narrowing his eyes over to Nico Robin, who gave a playful wave, he begrudgingly shook it. With Monkey D. Luffy, he knew where he stood, but with her...this was quite possibly the best way to determine Nico Robin's true motives so he could report them back to Marine Headquarters. If he was stuck with a bunch of criminals, he was going to keep his eyes and ears open.

"Captain!" Tashigi looked on in horror! "You can't..."

"We don't have much of a choice here, Tashigi...deal with it," he shut his eyes and shook the Devil Fruit hand. "It's done; are you happy now?"

"Yeah," Garnet nodded.

Steven started to clap. "This is going to be great! I can show you around and I can introduce you to everybody! Oh man; Lars is going to love you!"

"So, now that we are all happy with each other, may I direct you all to the people jumping up and down on the beach?" Genevieve pointed out to the shore.

All heads were now turned to look where the painter was pointing. Sure enough, two people were jumping up and down, waving a flag of some kind. Usopp peered out through his goggles and made out a teenager roughly his age wearing glasses and a smaller boy with similar blond hair. The flag appeared to be handmade with some words stitched on it.

"...'*Keep Beach City Weird?*' What does that mean?" Usopp asked Steven.

"That's Ronaldo's blog thing! He's come to see us back!" Steven was practically jumping for joy at seeing someone he knew. "And is that Peedee too?!"

"...'blog?'" the sniper was very confused. "What's a 'blog?'"

"...oh my god," Petrea started to look pale as a ghost. "I just realized..."

"What?! What's wrong, Petrea?!" Chopper asked worriedly. "Is it your wounds?!"

"No...but if we are here...this means we are going to meet...Onion!" she shivered.

"You mean Amethyst's friend's son?" Pearl asked. "Why is that a

bad thing?"

"I've heard stories about him...scary stories..."

The crew decided to give Petrea a few minutes to herself while they focused on the two boys. As they drifted closer, they prepared to dock the ship right onto the beach. When they were in earshot, they could all finally make out what he was saying.

"...and if you have come with a great sinister purpose, know that I, Ronaldo: wielder of the *Beautiful Girlfriend Satan* blade, will not be alone in my defenses! I know nine hundred men who would rise up and save this city at my mere call! Now tell us about the Diamonds and the sun and..."

"Hey!" Luffy called out to him. "We are gonna dock the boat! Don't get too close, okay!"

"Gah!" Ronaldo jumped back. "The ship spoke to us! It must be possessed, little bro!" Then he coughed and began to yell louder. "ARE YOU A GOOD SHIP OR A BAD SHIP?!"

"That's debatable," Smoker muttered to himself.

"AHOY, MATEY!" Steven called out to the Frymans. "PERMISSION TO LAND?"

"Is...is that Steven?!" Peedee tried to look on the deck of the giant sheep ship. "I think that's Steven!"

"Steven?!" Ronaldo stopped waving the flag thought about it. "HAND OVER STEVEN, YOU RUFFIANS!"

"Ruffians?!" Steven blinked. "NO, NO! THEY ARE MY FRIENDS! DON'T HURT THEM!"

"Friends...OH MY GOSH! THE GREAT DIAMOND AUTHORITY HAS BRAINWASHED STEVEN INTO BEING THEIR SLAVE!"

The hysterical teenager's younger brother just sighed and ignored him. "Dude! You're okay! You've been gone for days and you come back on a pirate ship! That...that is actually pretty cool!"

Tossing the anchor onto the shore, the Going Merry docked itself on the beach near the Gems' temple. The giant mast could be seen all the way to the boardwalk, intriguing the local business owners and workers who were planning on starting their day. One by one the people started rushing toward the beach to see the sight.

Steven was thrilled to be able to recognize all of his friends and neighbors. There were Kofi, Kiki, Jenny and Nanefua Pizza, the owners of Fish Stew Pizza; Mr. Fryman, Ronaldo and Peedee's father; Harold Smiley, the main operator of Beach City Funland; Sadie and Lars, Steven's best friends from the Big Donut; Buck Dewey and Sour Cream, two local older teens that are Steven's "cool" friends; Jamie and Barbara, the local mailmen; Suitcase Sam, a quiet man with an eye patch who typically kept to himself; Vidalia, Sour Cream's mother; and finally Onion, the object of Petrea's fears. It seemed everybody from all around had come to take a peek at the pirate ship.

"Wow, that's a lot of people!" Chopper looked on in amazement. "Are they all here for us?"

"Man, it seems that everybody in the city is here!" Greg whistled. "I wonder how long we've be...oh nuts. I doubt your parents are here, Connie, since they live out of town...or are they?"

"I don't see them!" Connie looked around. Then she opened up the backpack she was still carrying and started searching for her phone. Finally, she pulled out the older device and turned it on. At once, the screen showed both the date and several text messages from her mother and father. "Oh man, they've been texting me nonstop! We must have been gone for...hours? That can't be right."

"What can't be right, Connie?" Chopper asked.

"It says we have been gone for less than a day...which doesn't make sense! We were gone for almost a week!"

"Hmm...perhaps the Rifting Stone operates in real time, but the Belly Bag Badge warps time differently...like Uncle Grandpa," Garnet offered. "The important thing to take out of it is that you are home safe."

"I'm going to call my parents to let them know we found Steven and that we are okay!" Connie started to dial furiously, walking up towards the tangerine trees to get some privacy.

As she was doing that, Steven started to climb down the ladder on the side of the Merry, much to the shock and surprise of the people on the shore.

"It's Steven!" Sadie cheered.

"That Steven, always making an entrance in style," Jenny started clapping.

"It almost makes me want to go to sea," Sour Cream noted. "I could totally rave on that thing."

The boy finally stepped foot on shore, causing everybody to crowd and start talking excitedly at once. Steven, ever so humble, tried to answer everyone's questions, but it was proving impossible since he was not given a chance to speak.

However, the half-Gem was given a reprieve when a sound started echoing down the beach: "*May-Or Dew-Ey! May-Or Dew-Ey!*"

A vehicle with the slogan "Re-Elect Mayor Dewey" drove up to the crowd. The pirates, looking down from the ship, looked on at the odd sight of this mechanical device that carried a large caricature of a man's face on its roof.

"...what the hell IS that thing?" Zoro twitched an eyebrow.

"I think that's one of those car things that Steven told us about," Damian tried to hold back laughter at the absurd sight.

"IT'S SO COOL!" Luffy cheered. "I WANT ONE!"

"It's rather cute, isn't it?" Robin smiled as she watched Steven struggle to get out of the crowd.

"IF YOU SAY SO, ROBIN-CHAN!" Sanji immediately agreed.

As the Straw Hats were fawning, Smoker merely shook his head

and went to Tashigi. "I think I'm going to hate it here."

"Captain, what are we going to do? You don't actually expect us to work peacefully with someone like that...that murderer!" Tashigi narrowed her eyes as she looked to Robin.

"Like it or not. we don't have a damn choice unless that mayor down there tells us otherwise. For now, consider this a perfect opportunity to make sure these idiots keep in line...and to figure out a strategy to arrest them in the name of True Justice."

The girl meekly nodded, hating the situation even more than her captain. She hated being in a pirate ship in another dimension. The only consolation was that Steven was safe from the Vice Admiral. Now she just needed to keep him and this dimension safe from these pirates.

She warily joined the pirates, looking down to see a man step out of the car in a purple suit. His face was the exact same one that was on top of the car. 'That must be Mayor Dewey.'

"Steven Universe! You're alive and unharmed! Oh, thank heavens! What happened? Did someone...kidnap you?" the politician stumbled over into the crowd, trying to keep face while hiding his shock at the giant pirate ship docked on his beach.

"Hi, Mayor Dewey!" Steven waved. "Nobody kidnapped me. I..."

"OH, THANK GOODNESS!" Mayor Dewey practically got on the ground to pray. "See, people? Beach City is still the safest place to be! But tell us, where were you and WHERE did this giant ship come from?!"

Steven looked to the Going Merry back to the crowd. He folded his arms and thought about it for a moment. "That is a good question! How much time do you have? It's a long story..."



# The Awkward Introductions

"...and that's how we got back here!" Steven finished explaining to the crowd.

An awkward silence fell over the crowd. The people of Beach City were all very concerned for Steven's safety while he was presumed missing, but the tale that he was telling was quite a bit for them to take in at once. Usually they tried to keep out of the business of the Crystal Gems while they went about their daily lives. It was not because they disliked the Gems, but rather because it is easier to ignore what isn't known. Once innocence is lost, it can never be regained. As such, this was the most in-depth explanation many of them had ever received about what exactly Steven Universe does with his time.

"So that Crocodile guy used all of those people to further his goals by manipulating their dreams? That's not cool, man," Buck Dewey shook his head. "How can you go about tugging on someone's heartstrings only to use it for personal gain?"

"I know!" Steven said. "That's why I told the guys to give Genevieve and the others a chance!"

"Man, that's what so great about you: you get the way life really is," Buck flashed the boy a thumbs up.

"I guess that comes with being your own mom," Sour Cream observed.

"This is a lot to take in, Steven," Ronaldo started to pace around. "From what you are saying, you have found one part of a two part teleportation system from a Great Diamond Authority agent that was silently discredited in order to stop potential uprisings! Steven, this is a very serious piece of evidence! The key thing we should be focusing on is how they plan on using the system to get to our planet's core without its anchor..."

"...how the heck did you get THAT out of the story?" Lars cut him off. "All I understood was that Steven was a pirate and now he's

home with his pirate crew!"

"He read between the lines. That's an impressive skill," Buck pointed out.

As Lars turned beat red, a voice called down from the pirate ship. "HEY! CAN WE COME DOWN YET?! I WANT TO MEET YOUR FRIENDS!"

"Oh yeah!" Steven snapped his fingers. "Do you guys want to meet my awesome pirate crew?"

The younger people started to nod their heads eagerly while most of the adults looked uneasily at the pirate ship and back to Steven. "I don't know...I mean, aren't pirates dangerous?" Mr. Fryman scratched the back of his head.

"I agree! Pirates are outlaws and criminals! If they broke the law in their home, who's to say they won't do it here?!" Kofi Pizza frowned. "They could be a bad influence to my daughters!"

"But if they saved Steven, how bad could they be? They sounded nice enough in Steven's story..." Kiki tried to reason with her father.

"Besides, I'm already the evil twin! You can't be a bad influence on someone who is already evil!" Jenny pouted.

"Right there! That is exactly why it is a bad idea to let pirate hooligans in this city!"

"Oh, stop being a stick in the mud!" Nanefua scolded him. "I want to meet the pirates too."

"Mother! They are criminals!"

"And I could whoop their scurvy butts if they get out of line," she countered. "If those magical girls are fine with them, why shouldn't you be?"

Kofi opened his mouth to protest but quickly shut it, as he realized he didn't have a solid argument against his mother. Noticing this, the elderly woman gave a thumbs up to Steven and smiled. "Bring on

the fine, strapping young men!"

"You got it, Nanefua!" the boy laughed. "COME ON DOWN, GUYS!"

In a single leap, Monkey D. Luffy jumped off the side of the Going Merry and landed on the beach. Most of the others climbed down the side of the ship, with Smoker keeping the rear, presumably to be the last one on the ship. All that remained on the Merry was the Gems, Greg, Lion, and Connie.

"You should head down, Greg," Garnet told him. "I'm sure everyone will want to congratulate you on finding Steven."

"I will when Connie's done with her phone call...I can practically hear Priyanka all the way from over here," the elder Universe looked to the tangerine trees where Connie was pacing. "Can't say I blame them though..."

"It will all work out."

"Will it?" Pearl glanced down at the pirates introducing themselves to the people of Beach City. "This seems like a disaster just waiting to happen. They are nice enough people, very true, but I don't think Beach City can handle people like them here! That Smoker fellow is right..."

"Captain Smoker only sees them as criminals, but in the end he has the same goals and ideals that they have," Garnet folded her arms. "The only difference is that they are on opposite sides of the law."

"How can you say that like it doesn't matter?!"

"Simple: because the Straw Hat are renegades, outlaws, and traitors to their governing body. In the eyes of their World Government, they deserve to die no matter how much good they do along the way."

Pearl forced a laugh. "I don't think calling them 'renegades' is helping judge their character in the slightest! I..." Then she stopped and thought about exactly how Garnet just described them. Her eyes widened and then she put her hand over her mouth. "Oh my goodness! You aren't saying..."

"Yup. Like it or not Pearl, Beach City has always harbored criminals," Garnet smiled. "Come on, let's go join the people before Captain Smoker starts a fight."

"I...but..." Pearl started to stammer before being dragged to the edge of the ship by her leader. Garnet nodded to Greg before they jumped off the boat.

"...it's sad that this is a typical day for me," he laughed to himself.

\*AGITR\*

"...and this is Vidalia! She's Amethyst's good friend who is Sour Cream's and Onion's mom!" Steven finished introducing his friends and neighbors to the Straw Hats.

"I've got to come into the city more often if this is the kind of stuff that is going on," the middle aged woman chuckled, waving to all of the pirates. "I've been cooped up in the house too much."

"...are...are all of the members of your family named after food?" Sanji asked. Nami then proceeded to step on his foot, causing him to wince in pain.

"Stop being rude!"

"Nah, it's cool. My own mom named me after a vidalia because of my hair when I was born or something. I liked the theme and just went with it. Thankfully, Yellowtail didn't mind," she chuckled. "Gotta say, your ship looks pretty cool. If you don't mind, I'd love to come and bring my easel down here and paint it. I was just telling Amethyst a few weeks back how I could use the old spark again."

Genevieve, upon hearing that, started to smile. "You paint too?"

"You bet I do! Amethyst used to be my muse in the old days. She would shapeshift and turn into the most ridiculous things! If you want, I can show you some of my work. It's probably not as good as that emotional painting that you do, but you might like it," she offered the young painter.

"Sounds fun!"

"Well now that we have all been introduced, it is time for SOME of us to open up our shops! It is mid July after all," Kofi coughed to get his family's attention, who were fawning over Chopper. "The tourists will start filling up the boardwalk any time now!"

"Daddy!" Kiki and Jenny whined at once. "They just got here!"

"And I am sure they will be here later! Right now we have a responsibility to serve pizza to all visitors of this city...except those who choose to smoke around my children," his eyes narrowed as they followed the billowing smoke coming out of Smoker's cigars and Sanji's cigarette.

"Hey! That gives me a great idea!" Mr. Smiley said. "Mr. Mayor and Captain Luffy, why don't we make this pirate ship a tourist attraction, like part of the amusement parks? Visitors can come around to take pictures next to the pirate ship!"

The Marine captain sighed, ignoring Ronaldo trying to ask him a million questions. "That is the stupidest thing I have ever heard. Only an idiot would let innocent people play near a..."

"That is a wonderful idea!" Mayor Dewey nodded, clearly picturing the sight in his head. "I can see it now: we can set up a 'be a pirate stand' right next to the ship and generate some revenue for the town by selling little pirate flags...can we get pirate flags with that logo on it?"

"You mean you want to make Merry a theme park attraction?" Luffy asked.

"Think of it as an opportunity, young man!" Mayor Dewey explained. "You and your 'posse' are apparently stuck here for some time, right? Well, I can help you out when you are here, and you can help me out! Helping me out is helping the city out! Calling the mayor a friend isn't exactly a bad thing, eh?"

"Dad, stop trying to make them sell out," Buck told him. "It's one thing if they are trying to express themselves in a bold way, shouting to this dimension 'Hey! We are here!' But trying to cajole them to do it just isn't cool."

"Hold on..." Nami came up to join the conversation. "If we are stuck here for awhile, then we are going to need some of the local currency. All we have are berries. This might be a good idea."

"Miss Navigator, didn't I just give you jewels?" Nico Robin pointed out. "Perhaps that can be exchanged for money."

As Nami started to pout like Kiki and Jenny, Luffy just shrugged. "I don't care if kids come to look at my ship. It's gonna be the ship of the next Pirate King!"

"Keep telling yourself that, Straw Hat," Smoker joined them, leaving Tashigi with the Frymans. "There isn't going to be a Pirate King and I can guarantee you that ship will never make it to the end of the Grand Line!"

"Take that back!"

"Um, gentlemen," Mayor Dewey interjected. "Can we keep this civil, especially when all of the tourists and potential voters are no doubt arriving as we speak?"

"Mr. Mayor, I am aware that I have no authority here, but I am obligated to remind you that no matter how friendly they appear or how they helped the Universe boy, they are criminals awaiting imprisonment when we return to the Grand Line. I highly suggest you take them into custody!"

At once, the Straw Hats and Steven exploded into a fury of protests, all directed toward the mayor and, unsurprisingly, to the Marine himself. As most of the older citizens of Beach City started to take a few steps away in the hopes that the situation would diffuse itself, Mayor Dewey tried to speak over the shouting. He had a duty to perform as mayor and it was his job to handle the situation. The voters depended on his decisive action.

"Ahem," he coughed, not getting anywhere. Finally, he ran into his car and pulled out a megaphone. "Settle down folks! Settle down!" The yelling stopped and all eyes were on Bill Dewey. "You raise some very valid points, but the fact of the matter is, though I'm the mayor, I typically let this sort of stuff be dealt with by people with a

smidge more experience than I have."

"And who the hell are they?"

"Well..." he stammered before looking into the sky as Garnet and Pearl landed on the sand near them. "Ah! Here they are now!"

"...you've got to be kidding me!" Smoker muttered furiously.

"Oh. Hey," Garnet gave a slight wave to the people. "I told you we'd find Steven."

He gave a nervous laugh as he darted his eyes from the Marine, the pirates, and then back to the magical guardians who even knew his Great Great Grandfather. "There was never a doubt in my mind...uh...tall Crystal Gem. But I was hoping to get your advice on this little pirate matter that we seem to be having here."

"You mean Steven's friends," Garnet nodded to them. "They won't be any trouble. Don't worry about it."

"Called it!" Nanefua yelled out.

"Of all the...that's all you are going to do?! They can be incredibly dangerous...!" Smoker tried to protest.

"I'm sorry, but until proven otherwise, the pirates may stay!" Mayor Dewey flashed a smile before starting to cough. "Though I must insist that you and the blond one put out your cigarettes and cigars! We are a no smoking, no drinking beach community!"

The Marine took one look at the Mayor and the pirates before taking his cigars out of his mouth, putting them out on his shoes, and started to take a walk away from everybody. Tashigi started to run after him before being stopped by Garnet. "Let him be, Marine Girl. He needs to cool down and adjust," she smiled. "Besides, he'd get mad if you let them out of your sight."

Tashigi opened her mouth to protest, but quickly closed it when she realized that the Gem had a point and resumed silently fuming over the terrible predicament she was in.

"Sorry if I stirred up trouble or anything," Mr. Smiley looked embarrassed. "It's just that having a pirate ship in a beach area like this is really special."

"It's okay, Mr. Smiley," Steven explained. "Captain Smoker is a good guy, but it's a lot to take in."

"Yeah," Usopp nodded. "How would you feel if you were trapped in a parallel dimension with your worst enemies?"

The man opened his mouth to comment before shrugging. "I've got nothing. Still, maybe what you all need is to have a little Beach City fun to get you all settled! Tonight is our yearly 'Beach-A-Palooza!' You guys should come out to it. It'd be a great way to relax and for all of us to get to know each other better!"

"That's a great idea, Mr. Smiley! What do you say guys?" Steven asked his crew mates.

The Straw Hats themselves were all a bit uncomfortable. The shock of being in a new dimension was still sinking in. Along those same lines, the residents of Beach City still knew nothing about who these pirates were beyond what Steven had told them, which was not a lot.

"I think a meet and greet at the festival is a good way to break the ice," Nami nodded, trying to answer for the crew. "I'm sure it will be fun."

"Yo, the best way to break the ice would be an after-festival rave!" Sour Cream tried to interject. "Think about it: I could bring out my speakers and we could party right on the ship...or by the ship...but it'd be better on the ship..."

"No doubt about it," Buck nodded. "This rave has to be on the ship if it's gonna work."

"Hmm?" Luffy was getting more and more confused by the second. "Wait, you guys want to party later? We never did have that party we wanted to do before...so yeah! Let's party!"

"Um...Luffy, is having a party with teenagers on a ship with cannons



on it the smartest...?" Nami started to question her captain's judgment.

"We are going to need lots of meat!" Luffy was telling the kids. "Sanji, can you cook up something good for Steven's friends tonight?"

Sour Cream looked like he had just accomplished a lifelong dream as he gave an quick nod to the Straw Hat captain, who was trying to plan an impromptu party. "I don't know many interdimensional travelers, but if I did, you guys would be right at the top of my list."

"That was deep," Buck commented. "Come on; I'll help you get your stuff together."

"Word. Catch you guys later at Beach-A-Palooza. Mom, that's okay, right?"

"Of course, honey," Vidalia smiled. "You two have fun and I'll catch up with you later. Onion, if you want, you can go back with them."

The small boy with no ears nodded and followed the two cool kids away from the beach, but not before flashing Petrea a smile. The blonde chocolatier shuddered and focused back on admiring the view.

The departure of Buck, Onion, and Sour Cream set off a chain reaction of the adults finally returning to their jobs, taking their children with them. The only people left besides the Straw Hats were Vidalia, Lars, and Sadie.

"Say, where's Amethyst?" Vidalia asked Pearl. "I think I see Greg up there on the ship, but not her. Where'd she run off to?"

"Vidalia, when we were fighting the Baroque Works Agents, she took so much damage that she's retreated into her Gem for days now..." Pearl motioned for Garnet to come over. The tall Gem pulled out Amethyst's gemstone from her afro and showed it to Vidalia.

"Mind if I see her?" Vidalia asked.

"Just don't drop her," Garnet passed it to her.

The woman frowned and looked over the sparkling stone.  
"Hmm...you say she's been like this for days?"

"Yeah!" Steven nodded, looking upset at the sight of the gemstone.  
"It's the longest she's ever taken to regenerate. I miss her..."

"Well, we can't have the prodigal son upset upon his return, can we?" Vidalia ruffled Steven's hair as she walked to the edge of the sand. "Hey, ugly Ame...GET YOUR PURPLE BUTT OUT HERE!" she yelled as she flung the gemstone into the ocean.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!" Pearl shrieked.

"She just tossed Amethyst into the ocean!" Steven started to panic.

"...thank you, Steven. We never would have realized that without you pointing it out," Genevieve deadpanned.

"Bad timing!" Petrea scolded her.

The gemstone started to skip off of the ocean until it was swallowed by a wave. As the people who understood what was going on watched the wave with shock, only Vidalia kept an upbeat disposition.

"Wait, so your family can turn into little rocks?" Sadie asked, trying to make sense of everything. "I...I don't get it."

"Amethyst!" Steven didn't process Sadie's question. He threw off his Cheeseburger Backpack and ran to the water so he could swim after her.

"What the heck is going on down there?!" Greg called from the Going Merry.

"Vidalia, why on Earth would you do that?!" Pearl freaked out on the smiling housewife.

"Come on; the two of us got into so much trouble back in the day. Did you honestly expect us not to do something so stupid that it would cause her to turn back into a stone?" Vidalia smirked. "Give it a moment...this always used to work..."

All eyes were on the ocean, and technically Steven swimming out into the ocean to fetch the gemstone. But just as Steven made it past the point where he could swim without standing, a blinding purple light filled the water. Suddenly, a familiar face rose up from the sea, splashing and coughing up water.

"Gah! Where did all this water come from?! Wasn't I just in a desert? Where's that porcupine woman?! I'll...STEVEN!" Amethyst collected herself. She swam over to the boy, who started to cry tears of joy.

"Amethyst, you're okay! You've been gone for so long!" Steven hugged her as she led the two of them out of the water and to the beach.

"...woah! Are we back in Beach City?! How the heck did that happen?!" Amethyst looked around upon landing on the shore. She had finally noticed the familiar places and people all around her.

"Amethyst! You're back...and you look different!" Petrea ran over to give the Gem an equally large hug, breaking Amethyst's train of thought. She was right; Amethyst's outfit did indeed change slightly. Her black tank top was now a purple dress with a black star in the center of it. Her grey pants were now pure black, complimented by white boots.

"Woah! Coming in for the kill!" she laughed before getting a good look at her fighting partner. "What happened to you?!" Amethyst was now staring at the faded bruises on her body. True, a large part of Petrea's wounds had healed thanks to the advanced medicine in Alabasta, but she had still suffered major injuries not even a week ago.

"I...I kind of thought you were dead so I went off on Paula!"

The Gem laughed. "It'll take more than some pompous porcupine lady to take me down! Wait...all of you are here too? What the heck did I miss?"

"Gem regeneration does NOT work like that!" Pearl was running her hands through her hair as Amethyst started getting the rundown of what had happened by Steven and the others. "You can't just throw

a gemstone in water and wait for her to grow like some common plant!"

"Eh, clearly you don't know Amethyst that well," Vidalia chuckled, heading over to meet her friend. "She doesn't fit well into how things are supposed to work."

The Gem tried to comment on it, but words clearly escaped her. She looked to Garnet for clarity, but she just shrugged. "She's not wrong."

# The Furious Mother

After waiting for Connie's phone call to be finished, Steven eagerly led the Straw Hats and Tashigi to his beach house. He offered Lars and Sadie to come as well, but they were insistent that they needed to go open the Big Donut. However, Sadie promised that she would send over some celebratory donuts on the house to commemorate Steven's return home.

"Boy, isn't Sadie great? Free donuts? Who could ask for anything more?" Steven was humming to himself.

"I could! My mom is speeding here right now! What am I going to tell her?" Connie sullenly asked. "Oh, sorry I couldn't text you, mom. I didn't have any reception because I was in a parallel dimension bringing down an evil pirate trying to overthrow a desert kingdom. Oh, I'm technically a little over a week older than I was the last time you saw me!"

"Oh yeah...that's weird to think about..." Greg rubbed his beard. "What do we do about birthdays now? Steven, yours isn't that far off. How do you want to celebrate it?"

"I think on the day is easier. I honestly have no idea how long I was on the Grand Line for..." Steven shrugged. "I don't even know how long I have been away from here!"

"Ah," he nodded and sighed. "I was hoping that conversation would have lasted longer. I really don't want to think about the conversation I am about to have with your mother."

"You should just accept responsibility for what you did," Tashigi interjected, trying to fit in despite feeling even more awkward than before. Smoker was still getting some air on the beach, leaving watching the Straw Hats to her. "It will be better for you and...Connie? Connie."

Greg let out a single laugh and buried his face in his hands as he continued to walk. "I know...but she's going to kill us! Ugh, I'll never be trusted with you again!"

"Your mom sounds scary!" Luffy commented. "Is she really that bad?"

His navigator whispered something into his ear, which caused Luffy's jaw to drop. "NOT AN ABACUS! ANYTHING BUT AN ABACUS! I...wait, what's an 'abacus?'"

"You're an idiot," Nami shook her head. "So, this is your house, Steven? It seems rather small for five people..."

"Oh, I don't live in there!" Greg hastily clarified. "I live in a van down by the water...well, technically I can park it anywhere..."

"Am I supposed to know what any of that means?" Zoro asked.

"I vaguely recall Steven talking about this when I first met him," Damian admitted. "Still doesn't make a lick of sense to me."

"Don't feel bad. It took me centuries to understand all of the human advancements that have taken place on this planet," Pearl tried to comfort them, leaving them more confused and freaked out than she had intended.

"Wait, you still live in that thing? Greg, if you need a place to live, you could always come stay with me and Yellowtail," Vidalia offered. "You don't need to live in that dingy van of yours!"

"It's my special place!" Greg defended himself. "I've had it for half of my life!"

"Ah! I get it!" Luffy nodded. "It's your treasure!"

"Well, if we are being serious, this little guy is my treasure," Greg patted Steven's back, which made him smile. "But you've got the right idea."

"Aww, dad! You are making me blush!"

The group continued up to the edge of the sand until they hit a wooden staircase leading to an elevated wood house with a patio and railing all around the sides. Lion quickly departed from the group and found a spot under the patio for him to lay down. The young boy

started to run around excitedly, checking out every single nook and cranny in awe.

"Hello, house! Hello, umbrella! Hello, railing! I've missed you all so much!" Steven cheered in a singsong voice. "You are going to have so many new faces roaming your halls!"

"...he's talking to the house..." Usopp pointed out. "I think he's lost it."

Petrea hit his shoulder in frustration. "Stop that! He's been gone for weeks! Let him be!"

"I still don't see how you all live here," Nami looked at the exterior of the house.

"We live in the inner sanctums of the Crystal Temple!" Garnet told them somewhat theatrically. "It is only accessible through magical means!"

When the visitors didn't move or respond for a full minute, Amethyst started to laugh. "Dude, that just means that only Gems can open up the door! Don't worry about it!"

"Fascinating," Robin commented, glancing around the rocky exterior. "An entire magical temple...and nobody seems to question or care about its existence."

"Is anyone else starting to get worried?" Damian whispered.

""Starting?"" Usopp whispered back. "I've been worried this whole time!"

Steven went to the door and stood in front of it. "This is it guys! Hold your breath! Make a wish! Count to three!" Satisfied at the amount of hype he built up, he opened the door to the house and allowed the Straw Hats, the Gems, Tashigi, his father, Connie, and Vidalia to enter before him. The boy quickly followed and rushed to be in front of everyone. "Ladies, gentlemen, and Gems: the beach house!"

Looking around the house, the guests took in the lavish sights: to their left was a small couch with a love seat next to a coffee table.

Near it was a staircase leading to a small loft containing a bed and a television. To their right was a kitchen with a small island with a few chairs surrounding. Cabinets lined the walls and surrounded a refrigerator and an oven. There was additional cushioned seating built into the corner. All in all it was a very typical house.

That is, except for the giant pad and crystal room right in front of them, leading to a locked door with an odd, star symbol on it.

"So! Who's ready for the grand tour?" Steven asked.

"Can we start with that?" Genevieve asked, pointing to the crystallized area.

"No, silly! I've got this all planned out! That's the last part of the tour!" the boy smiled. "Now over here we have..."

"Steven! You need to tell us exactly what the heck is going on in there!" Luffy begged. "Please!"

"It looks so...cool!" Chopper walked over to look at it.

The half-Gem looked dejected. "But...but I didn't even show you my G.U.Y.S. yet!"

"It's okay, Steven," Garnet told them. "It's only natural to be curious."

"...fine," Steven relented. He led them into the decidedly different area of the house, with everyone examining the crystal structures. "This is the Warp Pad, which kind of connects us to different Warp Pads all around the planet! It's pretty cool! Oh, and that's the door to the Crystal Temple!"

"Can we go in?" Luffy asked.

"No," Garnet folded her arms dismissively.

"...can we go in now?" Luffy tried again a second later.

"No."

"How about..."



"No. Wait until the tour is over."

Luffy frowned dejectedly and sat down on the Warp Pad. The second he sat down, Usopp started to panic. "WHAT ARE YOU DOING?! YOU COULD BE SENT AWAY IF YOU STAND THERE!"

"Oh, silly pirate," Pearl laughed. "It only works if you have a Gem to activate it. The captain couldn't activate alone if he tried."

"Ah," he nodded. "Steven, fuse with me! I want to go on the Warp Pad!"

"Fusion isn't a tool to get what you want," Pearl reminded him. "It is a deep bond that only two Gems...or a half-Gem and another person I suppose... can share when their feels are united as one! Using fusion for little things like that just defeats the purpose of it."

"I swear, this fusion thing sounds more and more like a relationship every time I hear more about it," Damian muttered to himself.

"Amethyst, are you ever going to show me your room?" Vidalia elbowed her friend in the side. "I bet it's out of control."

"Girl, that doesn't even begin to describe it," she laughed, causing the older woman to chuckle along with her.

"Come on; let's finish taking a look around the house!" Steven tried to move everybody along. "I've got some really cool things here too!"

"Like what?" Usopp asked. "More crazy Gem stuff?"

"Nah! I've got a Sumy Dolphin though in my room! It's just as cool!"

"...what's a 'Sumy Dolphin?' Do you have another pet besides Lion?" the long-nosed pirate asked.

Steven could barely contain his smile as he started to giggle to himself. "I think you guys are gonna like it here!"

\*AGITR\*

Forty-five minutes after Steven introduced the Straw Hats to the

world of *Smash Pals Scuffle*, a knock was heard on the door. Though his loft was very crowded, Steven managed to pass the controller he was using over to Tashigi, who stared at it in wonder.

"What am I supposed to do with this?"

"You like stopping pirates, right? Now you can beat them up in a nonviolent, nonthreatening way!" the boy smiled as he went to go answer the door.

The Marine glanced down again and looked at who was playing. It was Sanji, Connie, and Zoro. Locking eyes with the swordsman, the Marine realized that this would be one of the most serious challenges she had faced yet: the chance to finally get Roronoa Zoro to fight her.

"Anyone else want to try this?" he gulped, clearly uncomfortable with challenging the Marine even in virtual combat.

"Don't even think about it, you monster," she warned him.

Listening to Tashigi "getting along" with the pirates made Steven very happy. He truly hoped that video games would bring everybody together, just like they always did (except when he played *Mueo Party*. That game always made Pearl incredibly angry with Amethyst). He was so happy that he didn't even think to look at who was at the door when he opened it.

"Well, Steven! I'm so pleased to see that you are back!" the stern yet motherly tones of Priyanka Maheswaran greeted him. The boy looked up and saw that she looked simultaneously relieved to see him and angry at the same time.

Uh oh.

"Dr. Maheswaran! Hi!" Steven started to sweat. He didn't want to get Connie in trouble when she just got here. "I'm glad to be back! Would you like to come in? I can make lemonade!"

"I don't think lemonade will be necessary, but I will take you up on your offer to come inside. I assume Connie is here as well?"

"Um...yeah..." Steven paused. "She's playing up in my loft!"

"Is she now? I...oh my stars," she stopped upon entering the small beach house and gazing at the large assortment of people gathered in one space. The male Straw Hats, Connie, and Tashigi were all crowed in the loft; Greg, Vidalia, Amethyst, and Genevieve were laughing in the kitchen; Nami and Petrea were having their own conversation on the couch; and Robin was asking the remaining Gems about their culture, which made a wary Pearl ease up slightly to the former criminal.

"What...how...who are all these people?!" Dr. Maheswaran was flabbergasted at the sight. Her eyes found her daughter, who was deep in virtual combat.

"Stop grabbing and throwing me!" Zoro angrily yelled at Tashigi. "There are other moves than throwing and charging!"

"Oh? Now you are interested in how I fight?" Tashigi responded bitterly. "Here I thought you could care less since I'm a woman."

"THAT'S NOT WHY I..." he started to argue before noticing the woman glaring daggers in his back from the ground level.

"Uh...Connie..."

"Not now! Take that, Colonel Eagle!" Connie laughed triumphantly.

"Shitty pink blob!" Sanji cursed. "Damn it, this is addicting!"

"EXCUSE ME?!" she bellowed. "WHAT DID YOU SAY TO MY DAUGHTER?!"

"...oh boy," Greg muttered, realizing who was here. "I'm dead."

"Mom!" Connie practically had a heart attack. "You're here already!"

"I am, young lady! I know you said that you had good reasons for ignoring our texts beyond being 'out of service,' but this is just too much! You are associating with people, older people for that matter, that I have never seen before in my life! I haven't even gotten to the pirate ship or...is that a reindeer wearing a hat?"

"She's scary!" Chopper hid behind Damian in fear.

"Oh! Hey, Priyanka," Greg gulped, getting the courage to walk over at last. "Found it here okay?"

"Hello...Greg," her eyebrow twitched. "So...what have you been doing with my daughter? Magical things with the Gems? Magical things that can't warrant a simple phone call letting me know where you are?"

"Now Priyanka, let me explain..."

"Greg, I thought we were on the same page about this! I let Connie come with you in the hopes for some much-needed closure. Staying home and dwelling about a missing friend...it isn't healthy for a person, let alone a twelve year old. But I had expected you of all people to keep me in the loop! You just lost your son and I watched you despair in agony for days!"

She sighed, and closed her eyes. When she opened them, they were less angry and gentler...but with a touch of sadness. "I'm new to all of this magical stuff, Greg...Doug too. It's a bitter pill to swallow, but we promised Connie that we would have an open mind to what she was doing with Steven. But you scared us; reality had set in. If you, a man who has been around magic and aliens for years, could be that scared, can you imagine how we must have felt even for a few hours?!"

Now she acknowledged the numerous people in the house, who had stayed quiet in order not to make the Maheswaran matriarch angrier than they thought she was. "What's worse is that when I finally get to know that my baby is okay, I get a vaguely worded response that couldn't let me know where you went or anything beyond what I already know! And why is that? To hide the fact that you are with a bunch of...teenage pirates?! I don't believe it! That doesn't even begin to explain the man outside balancing rocks on his arms, muttering to himself angrily like a madman! Is he a pirate too?!"

Mother and daughter locked eyes with each other as Priyanka began to plead to her. "Tell me I'm wrong. Tell me that you haven't been gallivanting with pirates out at sea in that pirate ship."

"It's...it's more complicated than that!" Connie stuttered, trying to take in everything her mother just told her. "I know that we didn't tell you about what we were doing, but it was a very spur-of-the-moment thing! We ended up traveling to other dimensions, fighting bad guys, and even saving a princess' country from the clutches of tyranny! You are always telling me to study and to read, but I just LIVED an adventure book! Yes, I did so with a bunch of pirates, but these are some of the kindest, thoughtful people I have ever met!"

"The blond one just cursed at you!"

"Yes, and we are playing a video game! Sometimes it happens! The point is that I know enough about language and proper behavior that I can tell what is appropriate and what isn't! I learned that from you and I will continue to learn throughout my life!"

"Connie, I don't think you understand..." Dr. Maheswaran took a moment to breathe. "Going out and doing all of these things without letting me know is unacceptable! I don't know who any of these people are and I can't tell if they are a positive influence on you! I'm just worried that you are in over your head and can't see the things that matter to you!"

"Dr. Ma...Priyanka," Greg interjected. "You asked me before we left that Connie stayed by my side. Throughout all of the fighting and turbulence, the only time she left was when we sent her, Steven, and Genevieve away from serious action on a duck. Yes, it sounds ridiculous and yes, maybe she shouldn't have come, but she was protected by everyone around her the entire time. The Gems had her back, I had her back, and they had her back. Yes, they are pirates and yes, they are technically fugitives, but there are times when you look past that to see the bigger picture."

Priyanka blinked several times as she continued to listen to Greg speak. "What I'm trying to say is...is not to blame Connie for not keeping you in the loop. Blame me. I deserve it and I understand if you and Doug do not trust my judgement anymore. I always had your daughter's best interest at heart, but I should have been more mindful of your opinions as well," Greg finished saying his piece, ready for the inevitable response from her.

"If I may?" a female voice called from the loft. Everybody turned and regarded Tashigi, who had gotten up and started to walk down to the ground level. "I don't profess to understand pretty much anything that is going on right now, but I do know some things. I am Master Chief Petty Officer Tashigi of the Marines...from my dimension I suppose. The man you met balancing rocks outside was my superior officer, Captain Smoker. The two of us have been assigned to capture and arrest the Straw Hat pirates, the people you see around you."

"...Marines? I feel like that is something more suited for the Navy," Priyanka mused to herself. "I appreciate you telling me this, but is this supposed to be helping the situation?"

"Ma'am, please hear me out. I have not known your daughter long, and I do NOT approve of children her age being on a pirate ship, but even...even I have to give them the proper credit they deserve," Tashigi explained.

"...what?!" Zoro practically choked on his own spit.

"Dang! Get it, girl!" Amethyst started to laugh.

"From the second I met your daughter and Steven, it became clear that these crimi...pirates were doing everything in their power to keep her safe. She was in good hands and she did the right thing in Alabasta, even when Marines like me were helpless to do anything about it," she looked down at her feet in shame. "It is one thing if they kept your daughter on their ship after the conflict was over, deliberately taking her on dangerous adventures, but from what I gather they were planning on returning her back to you safe and sound, before we messed things up for you. I know I have no right to tell you this, but you shouldn't blame your daughter or even Steven's father. They did the best they could in the situation."

Priyanka took the moment to observe all of the people in the room and considered the situation. It was quiet for several moments as everybody waited for a response. Tashigi was breathing heavily because she was utterly amazed at what she just did, the Straw Hats were shocked that they were defended by a Marine who hours earlier criticized them rather harshly, and Greg couldn't believe that

someone had come to his aid.

"Do you mean to tell me that you are an officer of the law...who is defending criminals?" Priyanka asked carefully.

"I am not defending them, no. They have made their choices and will suffer the consequences of it in due time. I am, however, defending their treatment of your daughter and her safety given the situation."

"I see..." she frowned. "And just who is the 'captain' of this pirate crew?"

Connie, unable to speak, pointed to Luffy, who gulped and jumped down. He bowed respectfully to the woman.

"Um...hello...uh...Connie's mom. I'm Monkey D. Luffy and..."

"You're the captain...of a pirate crew...at your age?"

"Hey! I'm seventeen!" Luffy pointed out.

"And you believe that you know enough to maintain a crew of people; that you have had enough experiences to be able to correctly identify needs and problems?"

"Nope! That's what I have my crew for!" the captain pointed to his crew. "Nami knows exactly what to do in every situation, Zoro is our fighter, Usopp is our liar, Sanji feeds us, Chopper is our doctor, and Robin is our archaeologist!"

"Oh, the reindeer is a doctor? You expect me to believe that?" Priyanka began to laugh. "Young man, I am a doctor and I can say with certainty that..."

"But I AM a doctor! I know all about medicine and proper healing techniques, from re-setting bones to wound treatment!" Chopper defended himself from the loft, which caused Priyanka to jump.

"THE REINDEER TALKED!" she was taken back. "HOW DID THE REINDEER TALK?!"

"A Devil Fruit!" Luffy smiled, using his finger to stretch his cheek. "See? I have one too! It gives you cool powers, but you lose the

ability to swim!"

Priyanka merely blinked and tried to accept the possibility that SHE was in over her head. "Alright, what about the rest of you? Where do you all come in?"

"Reformed criminals who gave up our life of crime to help Steven get back home," Genevieve commented. "It's a long story."

"...how old are you?"

"Fourteen and three quarters."

"I...I am at a loss for words," she tried to collect herself before regarding Steven and her daughter. "Connie, though I am disappointed that you couldn't tell me about this over the phone, I will relent upon seeing exactly WHAT has been going on here. There are things here that I just cannot understand at the present moment..."

"Does that mean I'm not trouble?" Connie asked hopefully.

"...no, you are not in trouble," she finally said. "And yes, you may still play with Steven. I'm not about to separate you two after the trouble it must have taken to get him back home with his family."

"What about us?" Luffy asked, hoping he wouldn't get in trouble either.

"You? I must say I still have serious misgivings about letting you all be around my daughter when I know NOTHING about you. I barely feel comfortable letting Connie see the Gems since I don't know anything about them beyond the fact that they do magic and protect the planet!"

"Darn tooting we do!" Amethyst laughed.

"Amethyst, please!" Pearl scolded her. "This is not the time to joke! Dr. Maheswaran, I assure you, everyone in this room has Connie's best interests in mind at all times. We know how delicate and fragile she is."



Connie's mother narrowed her eyes a bit. "Aren't you the one who is training my daughter how to use a magical sword...and didn't feel the need to ask for my permission?"

Pearl opened her mouth to retort that but began to blush.

"I...err...that is to say..."

"Look, I have a great idea!" Steven said, trying to draw attention away from any further conflict. "Tonight is Beach-A-Palooza and then there is going to be a big party on the ship! Why don't you and Connie's dad come too? It will be fun!"

"Yeah! You could be my parental chaperone!" Connie nodded quickly, catching onto Steven's idea.

"I don't know...I'm not sure how comfortable I feel about you being on a pirate ship that I know nothing about..."

"Oh! Me! Pick me!" Luffy raised his hand up in the air. "Pick me!"

"...yes, young man?" Priyanka asked warily.

"Why don't we have a big dinner out on the ship before the Beach-thingy! Sanji can cook the best food and you can see our ship!"

She thought about it for a moment and looked into the eyes of her child. The two children were giving her puppy-dog eyes as best as they could. Finally, she smiled. "Alright, I will concede to a 'character judging' dinner as long as my husband is fine with it. However, we have the rights to leave at anytime with Connie if we feel the environment is not conducive for her."

"Really mom?!" the young girl squealed as she hugged her mother. "This is great! Isn't that right, Steven?"

"I'm so happy I could cry!" the boy jumped up and down.

"Yes, well Connie, you still have lessons at home. We can be back here around five if that is enough time for you all?"

"Five hours?" Sanji grunted. "Not a problem at all. I'll whip up a nice meal for the young lady's lovely family."

"Don't think I haven't forgotten that obscene language you used in front of my daughter," Priyanka hissed. "You had best watch your language...and is that cigarette smoke I smell off of you?"

Sanji's eyebrow twitched as he sighed and left for the Going Merry dejectedly, unable to respond to her accusations. As this was happening, Connie grabbed her new backpack and hugged Steven goodbye.

"I'll see you later, okay?"

"Can't wait!" Steven hugged her back. After the two let go, he smiled at her mother. "Thank you again, Dr. Maheswaran!"

The woman gave a small smile and simply patted his back. "Just promise me you won't get lost like that again Steven. You scared us half to death."

"Pirate's honor!"

She raised an eyebrow at him. "What was that?"

"Gem's honor!" Steven hastily corrected himself.

"That's better. Goodbye, Steven. Goodbye, Greg," she directed her attention toward Greg, who still looked like a defeated dog.

"Um...goodbye, Dr. Maheswaran. I'll see you later...I suppose."

"What did I tell you about that?" she scolded him playfully. "If you and I are going to be friends, you will call me Priyanka. Understand?"

The simple comment caused Greg's face to light up as he nodded back to her. "Safe driving, you two!"

With that the two Maheswaran women left the house. The room was quiet as everybody's attention shifted away from them and to Tashigi, who had returned to the loft. She picked up the discarded Sumy Dolphin controllers and held them up in the air. "We have two open spots. Which one of you pirates is ready to be served Justice?"

# The Balancing Of Rocks

"I'm going to take my break now, Lars," Sadie told her friend and coworker. "Are you SURE you can handle being alone while I'm out?"

The blonde teenager had finished grabbing a variety of donuts to bring over to Steven's house and was preparing on heading over there. However, she was wary about leaving Lars in the shop by himself. The last few times he was given that responsibility...well, Sadie didn't like to think about them.

"I'll be fine, Sadie! Stop worrying so much!" he rolled his eyes at her. "Just...just be careful, okay? I can see that one guy with the cigars from the window and he's freaking me out! Heck, all of this pirate stuff is freaking me out!"

"I'm sure they are freaking out about this just as much as you are," Sadie clocked out and started for the door. "From what I gather, this wasn't exactly planned for them. How would you feel if you were in an unfamiliar place full of people that you didn't know?"

Lars shrugged and went back to listening to his music, causing Sadie to sigh. For every time the two of them bonded and grew closer, there would be two times where Lars would shut himself down and push her away. It was something that Sadie just accepted about their relationship, but it wasn't something that she liked. As such, she left the Big Donut feeling more flustered than she would have liked.

Just as Lars warned her about, she had indeed noticed the scary Marine captain seemingly meditating by the rocks near her job. The sight made her feel a bit nervous, but that diminished as she focused on what he was doing. He held his arms out as he tried to keep several rocks balanced on top of each other from falling off of his arms. Sadie was curious as to why he was doing it, as it seemed impossible to carry two separate towers of rocks balanced on his arms at once. However, living by Steven and the Gems showed her that nothing was impossible.

Heck, one time she stabbed an invisible rock monster with a spear she whittled. THAT sounds impossible, but it happened.

"Um...hello, Captain Smoker!" she waved awkwardly to the man, hoping to get his attention. "How are you doing?"

"Hh," he grunted, trying to keep his concentration.

"Uh, that's good...I guess," Sadie felt her face flush red in embarrassment. "I'm bringing some donuts over to the beach house if you are hungry..."

"No thank you," he muttered.

"Are you sure? I just heard your stomach growl."

"I'm sure."

She shrugged and continued on her way to Steven's before stopping and turning back around. "I just have to ask, how are you doing that?"

The sudden question caused Smoker to drop the rocks, much to Sadie's shock. She hadn't intended on disrupting the stranger and felt bad about causing his concentration to break.

"Oh my goodness! I am so sorry! I didn't mean..." Sadie stammered, trying to find the right words.

"Don't worry about it. They were going to fall eventually. It's not like anything else is going the way I expected today," Smoker sighed, grabbing a rock in his hand and examining it.

"...are you okay?" Sadie asked, taking a seat next to him and putting the donuts aside. "You've seemed kind of frazzled since you...well, got here."

"I'll admit, this isn't one of my better days," he frowned and put the rock down. "Mind if I ask you a question...I didn't catch your name."

"Sadie!" she said quickly. "Sadie Miller! And sure!"

"Nice to meet you," he extended his hand to shake hers. "I need to know, is everyone here so...friendly?"

"I'd say so," she shrugged. "Beach City is a pretty tight-knit community. You don't get that kind of feeling where you come from?"

"Kid, I'm a Marine. I deal with the worst of the worst on a daily basis. I've got stories that will give you nightmares...this isn't the kind of environment for a seasoned officer like me," he grimaced and regarded her. "It's too quiet."

"I wouldn't worry about it being quiet," Sadie tried to cheer him up. "We get some pretty weird stuff around here a lot. We even got attacked by some kind of weird glowing alien hand thing not that long ago."

"...I see."

She shrugged and picked up one of Smoker's rocks and held out her arm. She placed it down and tried to stack another rock on top of it. Over and over again it fell, much to Sadie's irritation. "Darn it! Now you've made me want to do that! How did you manage to get these things to stack, let alone how you got two separate piles on both of your arms?"

"Intense dedication and focus," Smoker explained, picking up another rock and balancing it on her arm. "Keep still and don't move. Allow yourself to believe that it is a part of your arm."

Concentrating with all of her might, Sadie kept her arm outstretched and watched as the two rocks wobbled on her arm, but did not fall. "Wow! That's really cool! You should do that at Beach-A-Palooza tonight!"

"Not my thing," he informed her. "I don't do 'parties.' It's bad enough I will have to attend a medal ceremony when I get back to the Grand Line for an honor I don't deserve."

"Oh? What's that?"

"You wouldn't understand..." he said dismissively. However, Sadie

would not stop staring at him, so he relented. "Fine, I didn't do a damn thing besides disable some ships. The credit should go to that damn Straw Hat, his crew, and those Crystal Gem women. They brought down Crocodile and helped restore Alabasta, not us. It doesn't make any damn sense..."

"Well, maybe it is like Garnet said. They didn't seem like they were that dangerous...maybe they are good pirates?" Sadie guessed before seeing the angry look on Smoker's face.

"There is no such thing as a 'good pirate,' Miss Miller. I do not expect you to understand since this world is so...innocent. When you get to know pirates, you quickly realize that they deserve no mercy regardless of their intentions. I've seen that fool do things that some people might write off as heroic, but I've seen it in his eyes...he will cause an uproar if he isn't stopped!"

"Wow, really?" Sadie sat there surprised. "I never would have guessed it."

"You never do. It might not happen now, it might not happen in two years...but it will happen. You can mark my word."

"Well then," Sadie smiled and patted the Marine on the boot, who looked at it confused. "It's a good thing you are here watching over them just in case. Between you and Steven's family, I think Beach City is in good hands."

She got up and picked up the donut box. "Still, regardless if they are heroes or menaces, I'm still going to go bring them some donuts. Who knows? Maybe some good old fried dough and icing can stop them from starting that uproar you were talking about."

She gave him a quick wave as she walked by him. Sadie felt pleased with her talk with the older man. He wasn't as scary as he seemed, but rather seemed like a lost soul put in the worst situation he could think of. She didn't quite subscribe to the theory that those Straw Hat guys were as dangerous as he let on, but that didn't matter to him. In his mind, they were the worst of the worst and here he was, forced to work with them until they could resume their game of cat and mouse.

Sadie was confident that Steven's family had good judgment regarding those pirates, so Smoker's story didn't really scare her. All it did was humanize him in her eyes, which put her anxiety about him at ease.

"Hey Miller, wait up," a gruff voice called out to her. Sadie was surprised to see Smoker slowly getting up and walking to her. He wasn't as defeated as he seemed before, but he still gave off an irritated vibe, as if Beach City didn't agree with him.

"Oh! Captain Smoker! Are you coming along too?"

"If I'm going to be here in your world, I'm at least going to be wherever that Straw Hat idiot is going to be. Hopefully Tashigi has been doing a respectable job..." Smoker frowned and went to grab one of his cigars. He stared at it and put it back, shaking his head. "...damn it."

"Whatever you say, captain," Sadie smiled. She offered the box of donuts to him once more. "Sure you don't want a donut instead of a cigar?"

"...I might as well."

\*AGITR\*

"Say, Steven," Usopp asked after he went down the stairs to use the bathroom. "I never noticed this giant picture before. Who is this woman?"

Steven paused the Dolphin gaming system and looked down to his crew mate. The long-nosed pirate was pointing to the picture hanging above the door. It was of a very beautiful woman with long, curly pink hair. The boy started to smile. "Oh! We got so caught up with the game that I never told you about my mom!"

"That's your mom?!" Luffy asked, getting up incredibly fast and knocking Zoro out of the way right into Damian. "Wow!"

"Oy! Watch it you idiot!" Zoro grumbled.

"...Luffy, you seriously couldn't figure that out?" Nami asked, shaking

her head yet again. "Steven shares so many facial features with her!"

"I'm not going to lie, I didn't even notice the picture," Petrea admitted.

"...you guys never cease to astound me..."

"She was beautiful, Steven," Petrea smiled. "And she looks like she was a very kind person."

The boy started to blush. "Yeah...yeah, she was!"

"I have a question," Tashigi put down her controller reluctantly since it seemed like her opportunity to put Zoro in his place would be put on hold for a while.

It was clear she was still incredibly uncomfortable with being so close to her most hated enemies and being unable to do anything about it. However, she had calmed down considerably upon finding an outlet to handle her aggression, which allowed her to be more open than she was when she arrived even mere hours ago. "When I first met you, you said she 'gave up her physical form' when you were born. What did you mean by that?"

"It means exactly that," Pearl chimed in. "Rose Quartz's life force was tied to her gemstone, which is now Steven's gem. In order for Steven to exist with his mother's gem, she needed to give up the body projected from her gemstone..."

Pearl sighed and looked longingly at the picture. "Rose was a wonderful Gem...just like Steven is now," she added, giving the boy a smile.

"...I...I don't get it. I mean I get that the gemstone was hers...but that's it," Tashigi admitted. "Did she just pass on or...?"

"That's what I just said," Pearl cocked her head slightly. "She passed on her gem to Steven so he could be born."

"I don't think that our Marine friend wasn't being literal," Robin tried to clarify, causing Tashigi to flash her an angry look. "What she



meant to ask was how Steven's mother died."

"What are you doing?!" Petrea hissed at her. "It's clear that she didn't want to phrase it like that!"

"Come now, Miss Valentine. Steven is old enough to know what it means to die," Robin pointed out.

"He's only a little boy! You shouldn't talk about his mother like that!" Petrea argued with her former coworker.

"But she's right!" Steven stuck up for himself. "I may be thirteen, but I know what death is! But it's different for my mom, because I'm technically my mom! It's how Gems work!"

Genevieve started coughing uncontrollably as the other dimensional visitors took in what Steven said. For his part, Steven rushed over to the girl to make sure she was okay. "Gah! Did the water you were drinking go down the wrong pipe?!"

"You...you..." she continued to choke.

"Me? I'm fine! I'm worried about you!"

"You're thirteen?!" she managed to get out.

The boy looked confused and nodded. "Um...yeah...I mean, I'll be fourteen in a little over a month!"

"What?!" Genevieve freaked out. Steven, still uneasy every time his painter friend started showing overwhelming emotion, backed up in panic. "You are barely a year younger than me?!"

"...yes? Didn't we clear that up in Little Garden?" Steven asked, still confused about what the commotion was about.

"No! No we didn't! I thought you were ten or something!"

The boy started to laugh. "Really? That's just silly! Right guys?"

He turned to his friends only to find everyone in the room besides the Gems, Greg, Vidalia, Luffy, and Robin looking utterly floored with

shock. "...guys?"

"YOU'RE A TEENAGER?!" Petrea yelled.

"...is it that hard to believe?"

"YES!" everyone yelled at once.

"Sorry, sport," Greg laughed. "They don't know you like we do I guess."

"Seriously, you act like a ten year old and look like a ten year old! I think we are justified in thinking that you were younger!" Usopp defended himself.

"Wait, you thought he was ten? That's hilarious! I thought it was obvious he was only four years younger than me!" Luffy laughed at his crew.

"Of course only you would have guessed that," Zoro rolled his eyes.

"He DID fuse with him," Nami pointed out. "If anyone would know, it would be him!"

"Honestly," Robin chuckled. "You all should have realized that his age isn't as it seems the second you met the other Gems."

"...I don't get you," Usopp narrowed his eyes. "I really don't."

"Back to the my original question," Tashigi coughed, doing her best not to grab the sword by her side and attack Robin for being so smug. "If it's a 'Gem thing,' wouldn't it be important to know about Gems? If we are connected to some kind of mystical, magical temple that has been guarded over for thousands of years, I'd really like to know exactly what I have been forced into."

"She's right," Damian nodded. "We know a little about all of this from what Steven told us before, but we need to be prepared for any of your Gem mutant things or that Peridot creature."

"See! Even they are more prepared than I am!" Tashigi pointed out angrily.

"To be fair, I've been hanging around Amethyst for years and besides knowing that Gems are living space rocks who can shapeshift, I barely know anything about you guys," Vidalia shrugged and sipped on her drink. "Just saying, Ame; you could let an old friend in every now and then."

"Dude, you never asked!" Amethyst countered the comment. "When did we ever care about serious stuff like that?"

"Point taken."

A knock was heard on the door once more and Steven went to open it. Still slightly frazzled by Dr. Maheswaran's unannounced appearance from earlier, he felt compelled to check the door this time. "It's Sadie! With donuts! Yay!"

The half-Gem opened the door and started to clap. "And she brought Captain Smoker too! This is the best door-opening experience I have had in ages!"

"...see, it's saying stuff like that which made us think that you were younger than you are," Genevieve rolled her eyes.

"Um...thanks, Steven?" Sadie blushed, unsure how to respond to a compliment like that. "I don't know what all of you like, so I grabbed a bit of everything. Say..." she looked around. "Wasn't there another one of you...and where's Connie?"

"Connie left with her mom and lover boy is out on the ship prepping a meal for later tonight," Greg explained as he grabbed a chocolate frosted with sprinkles. "Thanks for the donuts, Sadie. You really didn't have to do that."

"Just think of it as a 'Welcome Back, Steven' gift," she smiled. "Look, I've got to get back to the store, but I'll see you guys tonight at Beach-A-Palooza."

"Sadie, are you performing tonight? What great, hidden talent do you have?!" Steven asked excitedly.

"Me? On stage? No way. The only way you'd get me up there is if the captain here is up there with me," the blonde girl chuckled,

causing Smoker to frown.

"That's not happening, Universe. Don't even ask," he growled, taking note of Steven's changing facial expression. He then acknowledged Sadie, who blushed once again. "Miller, thanks for the talk. Keep it up."

"Will do, captain," she nodded and started walking back to the Big Donut, waving goodbye as she did so.

With her gone, Smoker began to check out his surroundings as the others ate their first food in this dimension. As with everyone else, he was drawn to the Warp Pad and the door to the inner chambers.

"Luffy, you need to pick last! Otherwise there won't be any to go around!" Usopp tried to stop his captain from inhaling all of the desserts at once.

"But I'm hungry now!" he bemoaned.

Smoker blocked all of the rubbish out and focused on the oddities that surrounded him. He expected Tashigi to let him know exactly what the Straw Hats had been doing, but she was beat to the punch. "I hope that helped clear your head."

"No thanks to you, Garnet," Smoker responded, trying to hold back annoyance with her earlier decisions. "However, it looks like I'm going to have to deal with it."

"That's one way of looking at it," she kept a neutral expression. "This is a once in a lifetime experience, Captain Smoker. I suggest you make the best of it."

"...I'll make the best of it when people stop telling me the same crap over and over again," he countered. "I get it. Now, mind telling me what all this is, or am I going to have to be debriefed by my subordinate?"

"You came at the right time then," she walked away back to the other side of the room. "I'd get a seat on the couch now before it fills up."

He raised an eyebrow and read between the lines. It seemed as if these Gems were going to finally try to make some sense out of this dimension. 'It's about damn time.'

"Listen up!" Garnet raised her voice. "If you all are going to be in this dimension while we try to figure this situation out, it is important that you know exactly what you have walked into."

The pirates all found room on the ground level, with Smoker electing to stand and watch from the back. Greg motioned for him to sit next to him, but the Marine ignored it. Instead, he focused on the Gem with the long nose who was looking around to make sure everyone was paying attention.

"As the bomb man here mentioned before, we are dealing with one of the worst crises we have faced in thousands of years," Pearl explained very seriously. "Not that long ago, Gems from our Homeworld came to this planet and engaged us in combat."

She held her hand to her head, allowing her gemstone to project an image of a large, muscular orange Gem; a depressed blue Gem; and a bespectacled green Gem. Upon seeing the blue one, Vidalia snapped her fingers. "Hey, she's the one who took our ocean...and that's the face that interrupted my shows last week!"

"You would be correct," Pearl nodded. "Lapis Lazuli was forced to reveal what was happening on this planet and returned here with Jasper and Peridot." Upon saying each name, her projection zoomed in on their faces.

"She looks tough," Zoro examined Jasper from his seat. "She'd make for a good fight."

"I don't think you can fight her," Petrea pointed out. "Don't you remember? She and Lapis are fused at the bottom of the ocean."

"You remembered!" Steven smiled.

Tashigi raised her hand. "I'm sorry if this sounds stupid, but what IS fusion? Is it just as simple as you all merging together or is there anything more to it?"

"Fusion is a deep bond that, when used correctly, can bring two Gems together in ways that have to be experienced to describe," Garnet answers. "If it is used for the wrong reasons though...it becomes a constant internal struggle and battle. That is what's happening with Malachite now."

"Who's Malachite?" Chopper asked. "I think I missed something."

In response, Pearl showed them all a projection of the two Gems dancing and merging into one. The room was silent as they watched the fusion drag itself deep into the ocean. "...if Malachite were to be transported to the Grand Line...she'd be unstoppable," Robin gasped, dropping her playful yet distant demeanor for the first time.

"Yeah; you guys can't swim, huh?" Amethyst reminded herself about the weaknesses of Devil Fruits. "That's beat."

"While Malachite is indeed the biggest threat, she is not our top priority," Pearl returned to the image of Peridot. "During the fighting, Peridot managed to flee in an escape pod and has been eluding capture from us. We found the wreckage of it not far from here and...Steven, are you paying attention?"

Everybody looked at Steven, who was showing pictures on his phone to Vidalia. "...and here's Sour Cream throwing a rock at it!"

"Aww, that's my boy."

"Steven," Greg whispered. "Save it for later!"

"What? I...oops! Sorry! Sorry everybody!" Steven turned bright red in shame.

"It's all right, Steven. I forgive you," Pearl smiled. "As I was saying, Peridot has been trying to contact Homeworld, specifically to Yellow Diamond herself!"

"...now there's a Diamond Gem in this?" Usopp scratched his head. "This is getting convoluted."

"I'm following along; that's all that matters," Nami shut him down. "Is Yellow Diamond the ruler of your planet?"

"In a way, yes. Gems follow a sort of caste system..." Pearl bit her lower lip and she thought about it. "...with the Diamonds at the top."

"Sounds like the Gorosei..." Smoker muttered.

"Regardless, our main goal is to stop Peridot before she does something to destroy or harm the planet. Unfortunately, her arrival also triggered the emergence of various Gem fusion experiments, which are shattered Gems forced to fuse together to create...well this..." Pearl changed the image to the Gems fighting grotesque creatures consisting of random limbs conjoined together as one.

Even the hardened Captain Smoker found himself repulsed by what he was seeing. After practically writing off this dimension as too 'gentle' for him, this was something so out of place that it practically offended him. 'Even Garnet is frazzled by them...and she could have taken down Crocodile by herself if he didn't blow up the room...'

"That is just disturbing," Robin shuddered.

"I'm going to have nightmares for days," Chopper shut his eyes tight.

"We have been fighting Corrupted Gems, or damaged, monster-like Gems that roam the Earth, for decades...but these are different. We have no idea why these are emerging from the Kindergarten or what Homeworld's end goal is, but Peridot claimed that this planet has 'an expiration date' which is not a good sign," Pearl stopped her recording and allowed all of that to sink in. "If we can't catch Peridot and stop this madness, there's no telling what will happen to this planet. This is where we are at right now."

After sitting quiet throughout all of the presentation, Luffy stood up and frowned. "So, I just have one question."

"Yes? What is it?"

"When do we go kick these things' asses?"

# The Bubbles And The Dinner

"...and that is why you will never use that word in Steven's house!" Pearl finished lecturing. "I don't want him picking up such bad habits like swearing!"

After hearing Luffy's declaration to "kick some asses," Pearl used the opportunity to explain to the visitors what kind of language and behavior was acceptable not only in front of Steven but in front of the others. This was not limited to purely the Straw Hat captain, but to all of them.

"I'm sorry, Pearl," Luffy apologized like a small child. "I'll try to do better while I'm here..."

"See that you do. If you think I am strict, the Mahesawarans will give you a rude awakening. If you wish to impress them, do NOT use vulgar language and engage into any rude behavior," Pearl pointed out. "This includes how you...ugh...eat."

"What's wrong with how I eat?" Luffy asked.

"If you need to ask, then you clearly aren't being proper enough," the Gem was quick to point out.

"Aww," Luffy said dejectedly. After a moment he tried asking his question again. "So, when do we...kick their butts?"

"Better," Pearl bowed. "But it still needs work. To answer your question, we aren't doing anything like that. You have to understand, a Gem's body is merely a physical construct generated from their gemstone. There isn't any 'butt' to kick with some of the fusion experiments."

"Pearl...you're being literal again," Amethyst laughed. "He wants to bust some Gems in!"

The Gem paused and nodded. "Oh...I understand now. It is impossible to say when or where Peridot, Malachite, the fusion experiments, or any of the other Corrupted Gems will show up. I do



feel the need to warn each and every one of you the dangers of taking on a Gem. They are far stronger than even the members of Baroque Works."

"Then why was Mr. 1 so difficult for you?" Zoro asked playfully.

Pearl shot him a furious look and tried to collect herself. "Your Devil Fruits are truly an unknown factor in Gem combat! I've been reading the encyclopedia the king gave me to try to determine the best possible strategies against them. We aren't used to actually fighting humans either...but that's beside the point and you know it!"

"Look, regardless of who is stronger or not, I think we need to know a few things about your kind," Smoker spoke up. All eyes were on him as every non Marine, save Steven and Garnet, didn't know what to make of the man who made it his mission to arrest every pirate in the room. "How do Gems get hurt, how do we keep Gems down, and do Gems die?"

"...that's a morbid question," Greg shuddered. "I don't think I like where this is going."

"What's to say that question was geared toward you three?" Zoro asked warily. "It sounds suspicious to me."

"We aren't the murderers here, Roronoa Zoro!" Tashigi snapped at him. "Unlike you or Miss Eternally-Wanted-Criminal over there!"

"Regardless of your attitude, the Marine has a point with his question," Robin frowned. "Gem physiology will no doubt be important to know if we are ever in a situation that sees us in direct combat with these 'Gem fusion experiments.' For example: while I understand a Gem can retreat into their gemstone like Miss Amethyst here, is there a limit to how much pain you can endure and is there a time limit for how long you stay within there?"

"...what the heck does any of that mean?!" Damian asked, getting increasingly more confused by the second.

"It means we are going to the Burning Room," Garnet folded her arms.

"What?!" Pearl turned around sharply.

"Yay!" Steven jumped up and ran to the door.

"But...but...you NEVER let anyone into the Burning Room unless it is an absolute emergency!" Pearl continued to question Garnet, who had stopped to talk to Vidalia.

"I'm not sure this is going to be the best place for you to be," Garnet told her. "It will be incredibly dangerous down there."

Vidalia chuckled. "Yeah; the name doesn't exactly make it sound like a walk in the park. I suppose I'll go check on the boys and Buck. I'm sure they will need help setting up everything for later tonight."

"Aww," Amethyst frowned. "I didn't even get to show you my room!"

"Next time, Ame," she patted her back. "Next time." The mother of two collected her things and waved goodbye to everyone. "If you make it out of there alive, I'll see you all at Beach-A-Palooza!"

The second the door closed, Usopp started to cry. "Why is it that just when I thought this was going to be a safe, nice dimension, we are literally going to a 'burning room?!'"

"Hey," Damian tried to calm him down. "Maybe it won't be that bad. After all, it's only a name. There's no need to freak out."

\*AGITR\*

"What the hell am I even looking at?!" Damian freaked out.

"I don't know...but I want to paint it," Genevieve said in awe as she looked around.

Garnet had led everyone into the depths of the Crystal Chamber, much to Luffy's sheer and utter delight. The room they were presently in appeared to be built over molten lava. Its stone floor was broken up by lava streams that appeared to lead into a giant pool in the center of the room. It was nearly impossible to make out the top of the ceiling, as several red vine like crystal columns descended down into the ground.

However, the strangest thing about the room was the bubbles floating in the sky. Several pink spheres littered the air, each containing some kind of gemstone. The only exception to this was a single bubble which held a bag of something called "Chaaaaps."

"BUBBLES! IT IS SO COOL!" Chopper exclaimed excitedly.

"This is one of the most dangerous and important rooms in all of the Temple," Garnet explained. "You asked some serious questions, Captain Smoker. As such, I expect you all to remain serious while you are in here."

"...that can be arranged," Smoker responded flatly as he looked around. He saw Tashigi doing the same before she tripped on one of the cracks in the ground, causing him to sight. "Pull yourself together, Tashigi!"

"What's this?" Luffy pointed to the bubbling liquid in the center pool.

"That's the lava pool."

"...you have a LAVA POOL in here?!" Greg ran his hands through his hair. "Steven, please, for the love of 'Bohemian Rhapsody,' tell me you don't play around in here!" When the boy didn't respond immediately, Greg grabbed the boy's shoulders and pointed to the pool. "Son, if you go near that lava pool without Pearl or Garnet with you, you lose T.V. for a year!"

"What?! Not a whole year! So many things could happen in that time!" Steven bemoaned as he imagined the dreadful punishment.

"Hey! What about me?!" Amethyst asked offended. "Why wasn't I on that list, Greg?!"

"I trust you even LESS around lava!"

"What's 'T.V.?'"" Chopper asked innocently.

"It's that thing we played the Dolphin on! It is one of the greatest luxuries this dimension has to offer," Steven explained. "I'll have to show you all everything that makes our dimension great tomorrow!"

"Ahem!" Garnet coughed softly, which caused everyone to focus on her once more. It appeared that regardless of their opinion of her, when Garnet spoke, the pirates and Marines listened. She waited a moment before pointing to the spheres floating in the air. "In each of these bubbles lies a Corrupted Gem or magical creature that has been contained so they could not regenerate. As you saw with Amethyst..."

"Yo," the Gem in question threw up a peace sign.

"...a Gem can indeed remake their physical body after intense combat. There is no way of knowing how much damage any given Gem can take, so be careful if you find yourself in a fight."

"No problem!" Luffy said excitedly. "So when do we fight them?"

"...you have a one-track mind, don't you?" Pearl asked. "I already told you, we can't be sure of when we will encounter any of..."

"What happens if I touched the bubble?" Luffy asked, ignoring Pearl's explanation.

"Don't do that!" Pearl ran over and stopped the rubber man from doing just that. "These bubbles are INCREDIBLY fragile! If you were to touch any of them...we would have a Gem creature running around the Temple!"

"Nice!" Luffy and Zoro said at the same time, eyeing the various bubbles around them.

Nami hit the two of them over their heads. "DON'T EVEN THINK ABOUT IT!"

"So the goal isn't to put down these Gems, but to contain them?" Chopper asked. "Are you sure they can't get out?"

"Of course they can't!" Pearl laughed. "Their Gems are bound by the magic of the bubbles to inhibit any kinds of regeneration! As long as they aren't tampered with..." Pearl shot a look to Luffy and Zoro. "...they will be safe and sound here in the Temple."

"This sounds like a catastrophe waiting to happen," Smoker pointed

out. "If a single one of these...things...were to escape, you would have a global crisis."

"I think we will be okay as long as the E.P.A. doesn't show up with Walter Peck," Greg chuckled nervously. "...oh, who am I kidding? I can't even joke about this! This scares the daylights out of me!"

"Chillax, guys," Amethyst reassured them. "Nothing that bad has happened in thousands of years..."

"What about the Slinker?" Steven asked.

"...I hated that name."

"So if you aren't trying to kill these creatures, why is there a lava pool clearly designed to destroy them here?" Robin asked.

"We don't just handle Corrupt Gems," Pearl corrected her. "We occasionally come across dangerous, magical artifacts that could potentially cause major damage. Besides, killing these poor, damaged Gems is not what Rose Quartz would have wanted. We do not have the means to heal them, but one day we might."

"So you CAN die," Smoker caught on.

"If a gemstone is cracked, their physical form will begin to glitch uncontrollably but will still be alive. If the stone is SHATTERED, then they will cease to be."

"Good to know."

"...so..." Steven took advantage of the quiet that followed Smoker's observation. "Now that everyone knows everything, can we go back to relaxing now?" Steven pleaded earnestly. "I want to finish our match...oh no! We don't have time for Dolphin! We have to get ready for the dinner party and to prepare for the show!"

"Dinner!" Luffy's ears picked up, immediately forgetting the floating bubbles upon the mention of the word.

"Are we going to have to dress up for this?" Greg asked. "I'm going to need to find my good shirt!"

"I just realized something..." Tashigi looked down at herself. "This is the only outfit I have with me!"

"That's what you get for sneaking on our ship unprepared," Zoro muttered.

"What was that?!"

"Hmm...clothes are all you need?" Pearl tapped her finger to her cheek. "We might have something that can help with that."

"You have a spare change of clothes?"

"No, we have the Talisman of Cloth. It is a magical artifact that can allow us to replicate and create clothing," Pearl elaborated. "A mundane use for a talisman, I know, but that was its intended use nevertheless."

"Is that how I get my shirts?" Steven asked.

"That is exactly how you get your shirts Steven. Now show me some pictures of some of your 'fancy clothing' and I will whip you up some human clothes in no time!"

"Yay! Magic!"

"Wait...all this time you had a magical clothing maker and you never once thought to help me out with my limited wardrobe?! What the heck?!" Greg bemoaned as they all left the room.

The last one to leave was Luffy, who stared transfixed at the floating bubbles. He went to pop one, just to see one of these monsters in action. Just as his finger was mere inches away from the bubble, Luffy found himself being dragged away by Garnet.

"Come on...no bubbles for you..." she told him in her monotone yet strict voice.

\*AGITR\*

"I'm not sure if this was the safest idea you have agreed to, dear," Doug Maheswaran told his wife as they drove toward the shore.

The security guard and his doctor wife had only recently been exposed to the true nature of Steven Universe's world, but it took a lot of convincing for him to even allow such a preposterous meeting to take place. They had put on some of their better dinner clothes for the occasion, including a dress for Connie. "I mean, are we really going to be on a real pirate ship?"

"Yes, dad! The Going Merry is a beautiful caravel ship! I assure you it is fully functional, seafaring, and safe enough for a dinner!" Connie continued to justify the meeting.

"While I am happy to hear that you have been studying on your ships, it just seems off to me. Actual pirates inviting us to dinner? It's ridiculous!"

"Honey, I assure you that they aren't the kind of pirates you are thinking of," Priyanka reassured him. "Admittedly, that makes me even more suspicious of them..."

"I promise you both that there will be no problems tonight. We are going to have a wonderful dinner and then I will play my violin in the Beach-A-Palooza show. Don't you want to hear me perform?" Connie asked, knowing exact which heartstrings to tug at. "I've been practicing so hard..."

"Of course we do, honey...it's the before and after that I have reservations about," Doug elaborated. "I already think that a late night dance is no place for a twelve year old, but having it on the pirate ship I'm already worrying about just makes it worse!"

"Then isn't it a great thing I have the best security guard in the world as my father?" Connie smiled.

The Maheswaran patriarch returned it through the rear view mirror. "Well, I do suppose that I am a good judge of what is safe, aren't I?"

"You're a great judge, honey," Priyanka nudged him playfully. "Turn up here and it will be the only pirate ship on the right."

The small family laughed as they found a parking spot right near the beach. They began to walk as the familiar image of the Going Merry

came into view. The elder Maheswaran was in awe for a moment before he noticed the cannons on the side of the boat, causing him to frown. "Is...is that ship armed?!"

"It's a pirate ship, dad. What did you expect?" Connie pointed out.

As he opened his mouth to argue, a small figure ran toward the trio. It was Steven in a suit and bow tie. He waved to them excitedly. "Connie! Dr. and Mr. Maheswaran! You're here!"

"Hello, Steven," Doug nodded. "I'm glad you are back safe and sound."

"Yeah; it's good to be back! Welcome to the Going Merry! Isn't she a beaut?" Steven chuckled to himself.

"I don't know if I'd call her a 'beaut' with cannons pointed at us," he looked uneasily once again at the weapons.

"Steven!" Connie interrupted her father before he could get started again. "Is everyone on the ship waiting for us?"

"Yes they are! They are so excited to meet you all! I can guarantee that Sanji will have your mouths watering!"

"That's rather unbecoming," Doug frowned.

"Sanji is the vulgar one who smells of cigarettes, correct?" Priyanka narrowed her eyes. "He did not leave a good first impression on me."

The children looked at each other nervously. "Lead the way, Steven?" Connie begged him.

"Yes. Yes I will."

Since docking on the beach, the Gems created a ramp leading from the sand to the deck of the ship. This allowed everyone to enter and exit it without having to use the ladder. When they made it to the ship, they found an amazing sight: everyone dressed up in three-piece suits and fancy, elegant dresses around a long, makeshift table with multiple chairs around it. This included the Gems, which



was a first for Connie.

"Woah," she whispered. "They are beautiful!"

"I know! I begged them to get dressed up too!" Steven smiled. "Do you like the table? Pearl and dad only just finished it. I hope it's okay..."

"It's great, Steven," Connie reassured him.

"Ah! The guests are here! Welcome one and all, Maheswaran family!" Sanji walked over and took a bow. "Mr. Maheswaran, we haven't been properly introduced but they call me Sanji and I will be your chef for tonight. May I take anything of yours to put away?"

"...I think we will pass on that," Doug told him.

"Well, allow me to show you all to your seat. Dinner will be served shortly. Tonight we will be eating some of the finest sea king meat from the Grand Line."

The two parents looked to each other uneasily. "...did he say 'sea king?'"

"Ladies, gentlemen," Sanji announced to the mingling pirates, Gems, humans, and Marines (the latter of which were keeping to themselves on the far end of the ship). "I would ask that everyone would please come to the table. Would anyone like some vintage wine from our special supply?"

"...wine? Are you even old enough to drink?" Dr. Maheswaran asked.

"I'm nineteen."

"Then you aren't even close!" she said, incredibly offended. "In our...dimension...you need to be at least twenty one to drink alcohol!"

"Thank god," Damian said to himself as Sanji's eyebrow twitched dangerously. Zoro, on the other hand, looked like he wanted to kill himself right then and there. "Man, I'm so sorry."

"...kill me..." he muttered. "Kill me slowly."

\*AGITR\*

"...and that's how I learned about medicine!" Chopper finished his story to Connie's mom.

The mood at the table was surprisingly not as tense as Steven feared. As expected, the Maheswarans were interrogating the pirates, but Steven had sat everyone down before they arrived and pleaded for his friends to be on their best behavior for the meal. This was especially directed toward including Luffy and Amethyst's bad table manners and Smoker's (justified) animosity towards the Straw Hats. For the boy's sake, they all agreed, albeit reluctantly.

"That is a most unorthodox way of becoming a doctor," Priyanka frowned. "But it is an emotional tale nevertheless. I am sorry for your loss."

"Chopper has done great work," Petrea showed off her foot under her dress. "This had a hole straight through it not even a week ago. Now it is almost completely healed."

The doctor examined in and began to nod. "You must have some potent medicine on your 'Grand Line.' This is very impressive. Even the best doctors I know couldn't heal a wound this fast."

"Oh stop it, you...nice lady," Chopper stopped himself from his usual way of handling compliments.

"Well, I am going to go check on the dessert," Petrea got up. "Can I get anyone anything?"

"Do you mind if I join you?" Pearl asked. "All of this food is so...unpleasant."

"Now that I will disagree with! I have absolutely no idea what this 'sea king' is, but it is delicious!" Doug laughed as he put down his fork. The Gem shook her head and went into the kitchen with the chocolatier. "And you say this is a rare fish in your world?"

"Very," Sanji explained. "Sea kings are notoriously dangerous

creatures. It took a lot of pull with the princess' family to get us even this."

"Hmph," Smoker grunted at the end of the table.. However. It is hard to keep a mouth shut every now and then. "I'm amazed it wasn't stolen."

"What was that?" Doug asked down his way.

Under the table, Tashigi stepped on Smoker's foot. Giving his subordinate a dirty look, the man sighed. "I said that I'm amazed that this was cooked so golden. It's hard to do."

"Is that right?"

"We will have words after this, Tashigi," Smoker whispered to Tashigi, who turned pale.

"I must say, I'm confused. You are a man of the law, yet you are dining on a pirate ship. How did that happen?" Doug inquired as he ate more of his meal.

"We happened to infiltrate this ship at the wrong time and the wrong place," he grumbled.

"He thought he was saving me and Steven from trouble, but we were fine!" Connie added hastily.

Doug smiled at his daughter. "Trouble, eh? Well, to be perfectly honest, you seem to be handling this rather well. If this were me, I don't know if I could do it."

"The children are home and safe," Tashigi chimed in. "That's all that matters. We can put our personal vendettas on hold for the time being...as hard as that can be at times."

She glanced over to Luffy, who kept being nudged by Nami to use proper utensils while eating his meat; a first for him. He noticed and waved to them. "Hi, Smokey! Hi, Tashigi!"

"So that makes him the Valjean to your Javert, eh?" Doug chuckled at his own joke.

"I can't say that I follow your comparison, Mr. Maheswaran," the Marine frowned.

"It's a reference to *Les Misérables*," Connie started to explain.

"You mean the movie?" Steven asked.

"The musical?" Greg asked.

"The musical movie?" Steven tried again.

"It was a book first," Connie informed them. "A very long, dense book."

"Oh, that was a book?! I'd love to read it!"

"Steven Universe, if you can finish that whole book, I will gladly shake your hand," Priyanka laughed. "I used it as a doorstop back in college when mine would get stolen. Not one of my prouder moments, but college requires you to do things that you never thought you would do. Isn't that right, Greg?"

The elder Universe started to choke on his food, causing Usopp to help him cough it up. "College...yeah...totally!"

"To answer your question, Javert was a determined officer of the law who made it his life's mission to hunt down the escaped convict Jean Valjean. It's an amazing story," Doug gushed about it.

"You have to excuse my husband; he can get passionate about the things he enjoys at times."

"What happened?" Smoker asked, curious about the book now. "Did he catch him? The criminal?"

"That's the beauty of it. In the middle of the story, the inspector has been captured by the revolutionist students during an uprising. Valjean, who had joined the uprising after learning about his daughter's true love, is given the ability to kill Javert but instead set him free," Doug told the entire table, who were mostly listening. "Javert continued to swear that he would bring him to justice, but let him go later on when he came across the convict trying to bring the

near-dead body of the boy his daughter loves. Realizing what he had done and how his sense of justice had been turned upside down, he threw himself into the river below, never to be seen again."

"Ah," Nico Robin nodded. "Suicide."

"...I was trying to avoid using that word in front of the children," Doug narrowed his eyes at her. "But yes, that is exactly what he did."

"Woah..." Luffy said after swallowing some food. "That's spooky!"

"What is?"

"We saved Smokey and Tashigi here in Alabasta and then WE were let go! Crazy...right, Smokey?"

The Marine did not say a word as he contemplated the story internally. It was clear that it was affecting him in a way that meant not to acknowledge him.

"...so...how is everyone liking their food?" Steven asked, trying to diffuse the tension. "Sanji is a good cook, am I right?"

"While he might be rude, I have to agree with that," Priyanka admitted. "You have a way with food."

"Thank you, Lady Maheswaran," the chef bowed exaggeratedly.

"Oh brother," Zoro shook his head.

"Does this mean that it's okay for me to keep hanging around them while they are here?" Connie asked hopefully.

"What did I say that would give you that idea?" Priyanka looked offended. "Did I say that?"

"...no...I guess not."

"Still," she glanced around the room. "I will say that I have been impressed. You were all far more civilized than I expected."

"I agree," Doug nodded. "This has been one of the nicer meals I

have had in quite some time."

"Regardless, I think I can speak for Doug when I say that we are fine with you being around them as long as one of us or Steven's guardians are around to watch," she smiled.

"REALLY?!" Steven and Connie asked excitedly.

"ALRIGHT!" Luffy, Usopp, and Chopper cheered at the same time.

"Yay," Genevieve said weakly.

"However..." Priyanka started again, getting everyone's attention.

"There remains one thing to be seen."

"...which is?" Connie asked.

"There is still the festival and this dance we are chaperoning. Dinner is one thing, but being in a large social environment is another," she told them. "That will alleviate any doubts the two of us have, especially about how safe this ship can be with so many people dancing on it."

The Straw Hats looked at each other worryingly and then to Steven and Connie. The two looked as if all the color was drained out of their faces. It was clear that asking everyone to be as respectful as the Maheswarans were expecting while partying was a near impossible task. Pirates simply do not restrain themselves when they celebrate.

As everyone started to internally worry about the upcoming Beach-A-Palooza and rave, Pearl and Petrea brought out a nice spread of chocolate treats. "Dessert is served! I..." Petrea announced as she looked at everyone's shocked faces. "...did I miss something?"

# **The Beach-A-Palooza Performance**

The beach around the Beach City Stage was a beautiful serene sight. The wind was light and the weather was just right. Everything was as perfect as it could be.

Everything, that is, except for the Straw Hats' nerves.

Connie's parents had added a lot of pressure for them to be on their best behavior. This would normally not be as big of an issue as they were making it, but nobody wanted to be the one responsible for Connie being kept away from them. For their part, they had been keeping their promise not to overtly show the animosity between pirate and Marines. For Tashigi, it wasn't that hard except when she was forced to deal with Zoro or Robin. Smoker, on the other hand, had been keeping to himself even more than usual since the dinner. The man had politely told Steven that there was no way he would step foot on that stage and, as such, left them to watch from the crowd. Steven tried to get him to come back, but realized that it was best to let him be...for now.

The Gems, Greg, and the Maheswarans were currently out in the crowd of people looking at the small stage. The Going Merry was not too far away, and Sour Cream was waiting for their performance to be done before he set up his generator and equipment (though he had set up a small portion of his gear to help the young half-Gem for his big surprise performance). Luffy, having no idea what any of that meant, was excited to see it, but tried not to be too excited for Connie's sake.

In addition to the Straw Hats and Sour Cream, Steven had enlisted the help of Jamie (the mailman/actor) to handle a small bit of narration. He was presently running over his lines now that he no longer was putting on his performance as a mime. The young man was honored to take part in the act, loving what Steven wrote for him. However, this sentiment was not shared by the other participants.

"Are we sure that this is the best way to introduce ourselves to your

community? It seems rather...strange," Nami asked Steven.

"You think all of my ideas are strange, but they have a good track record of working!" Steven countered.

"What about Mr. 3? You would have been killed if not for Damian's intervention," Nami reminded him.

"I can read people!"

"Did you read that Crocodile would try to kill you in the desert?" Robin asked him. "If I wasn't there, you and the Luffy would have been trapped in sand with a deadly stab wound."

"I knew that you were a good person, and you proved me right!"

Robin, for her part, was in an even more awkward place than Tashigi and Smoker. Outside of Luffy and Steven, nearly everyone around her hated her for her part in Baroque Works. The wounds were still too fresh to heal and stowing away on their ship without them knowing didn't help. Looking at it another way, she was still trying to figure out most of her new crew mates. Most of them were very odd; a far cry from most of the people she preferred to aquatint herself with (Mr. 2 being the main exception, but she never considered him anything more than a coworker).

But that is why she decided to accept Luffy's offer. People this odd were exactly the kind of people that she needed to be with. Even so, she had to admit that this idea was rather ludicrous.

"Steven, I have to agree somewhat with Miss Navigator here. I do not know if this conveys the right tone to introduce us to your peers...it might send the wrong message."

"Hey," Steven assured her. "I know the youth of today here! This is what they will like!"

"If you say so," Robin shrugged.

"You know, when you explained this to us, I was all for it," Zoro groaned. "Then I realized I had to be sober."



"Guys, I'm sorry," Connie apologized as she finished tuning her violin. "We Maheswarans are really concerned about safety and sometimes my parents can be a bit much..."

"Connie, your parents are doing what they feel is best for you," Robin took a moment to smile at her. "You shouldn't apologize for them. Allow them the proper time to see the Straw Hats for what they really are and I am sure they will see your side of things."

Standing nearby, Tashigi, who had fully committed to doing this for Steven and to show that Marines were all for the people, raised an eyebrow. Thankfully, she merely had a very small part to play in Steven's performance, which she objected to on the grounds that it contradicted the script, but was ignored. However, all thoughts about what she was going to do was put on hold as she tried to read into Robin's comment. 'For someone as ruthless as you, to take a moment to remind a girl that her parents are trying to do what they feel is right is perplexing...why would you do that? What is going on in that twisted head of yours?'

"I suppose you are right, Robin," Connie returned the smile. "Are...are you guys going to be okay?"

"Don't worry about us," Genevieve said as she finished her painting, which was to be used in the show. "We can handle this. Your parents and all of Beach City are going to love us."

"You mean it?"

"Of course. There's no need to panic. You don't see me panicking. When are you up?"

"After Ronaldo finishes his speech about rocks," Connie chuckled lightly. "He put in a lot of work."

"Work? This is genius!" Usopp called to them from the other side of the beach where they were waiting. He was listening intently to the young man's rant about sentient rocks and their "diamond authority." "This guy is just making so much sense about this world...I think I'm starting to understand your family, Steven!"

"...Ronaldo is talking about my dad?"

"No! Sentient rocks...are you telling me that isn't about the Gems?"  
Usopp frowned. "Have I just been reading into it?"

"I don't know!" Steven admitted. He held up a small piece of paper that had handwritten notes on it. "I haven't been listening to him! I've kind of been going over the lyrics I wrote. I don't want to mess up."

"Let me look at it," he offered. The sniper glanced over it and pointed at a word. "You misspelled Zoro as 'Zolo.'"

"I did? Gah! What if I say that on stage?!" Steven started to freak out.

"Steven, when have you ever had stage fright?" Connie reassured him. "I'm the one who should be nervous!"

"You guys are ridiculous," Genevieve shook her head. "I..."

"Thank you, Ronaldo! That was some thrilling insight!" the voice of Mr. Smiley announced, cutting Genevieve off. A small round of applause followed before he continued. "Now it's time to welcome a new face to our stage, but not one from our town. Please welcome Connie Maheswaran to the stage as she plays 'Tanguera' on her violin!"

The girl in question's face turned beat red. She gave a quick hug to her best friend before she scurried onto the stage. The second she left, Genevieve put down her paint brush and sighed.

"Whelp...I'm panicking," she admitted.

\*AGITR\*

"Your daughter is a fantastic violinist," Smoker told the Maheswarans. "You should be proud of her dedication."

The adults and Gems had been surprised to see Smoker in the crowd as opposed to the others, but Garnet was perceptive enough to ask them not to press it. Instead, they invited him to stand with them and watch together as opposed to being on the sidelines by

himself, which is what he no doubt would have preferred.

"Connie is an incredibly gifted girl," Priyanka smiled. "Okay, hit the note, hit the...she hit it! It was giving her so much trouble in practice."

"I can only imagine," he frowned as he listened on. However, eventually that was interrupted by another person coming over to acknowledge him.

"Captain Smoker! You came after all!" Sadie Miller called to him. She was walking over with Lars, who seemed a bit nervous to approach the Marine. "Hello, Mr. Universe!"

"Oh, Sadie! How are you doing? Why aren't you performing up there with everyone else? Don't you want to show off those sweet guitar moves I taught you?" Greg pantomimed playing a guitar.

"Nah, not this year," she shrugged. "I'm not ready to be seen in front of all my judging peers."

"Fair enough," Greg conceded.

"So, decided not to perform?" Sadie asked Smoker. "It's a shame. That rock thing you do would have been a good compliment to Ronaldo's speech on rocks."

"Is that what that was about?" Amethyst asked. "I think I started to fall asleep during it."

The Marine did not respond as Connie's performance finally ended, generating enormous applause from everyone in the crowd. Smoker joined them, believing that the girl truly deserved it.

Smoker felt a tug at his jacket. He looked down and saw Steven, giving him pleading star eyes. "...please?"

The Marine groaned. The boy had asked him to do something rather mundane yet offensive and he truly had no desire to take any part in his farcical performance. However, before he could object he locked eyes with Sadie. Something about the way she looked at him made him rethink his stance on the matter. If this would show the people of

Beach City the caliber of person that made up the Marines, then it would be worth it. Relenting, he nodded. "...fine...but I'm strongly noting my objections to what you asked me to do."

"Duly noted! Come on! Excuse me!" Steven said as he pulled Smoker along, much to his displeasure.

"Wow! That was something truly special!" Mr. Smiley returned to the stage, showing Connie off after she finished her bow. "You know, Beach City is a pretty special place. Heck, now we even have our own pirate ship. Now, I know I'm not the only one with questions about that beautiful vessel and the people on it. Thankfully, our own Steven Universe is here to help us get to know these barnacle brained pirates called the Straw Hats!"

The curtains behind Mr. Smiley opened and a giant tarp was set up like to look like a pirate ship. It was incredibly detailed, which showed the level of realism Genevieve clearly strives for. Finally, smoke started to billow out onto the stage, setting a dark mood for the crowd.

"Did Steven really only need him for his ability to turn his body into smoke?" Pearl asked. "That seems like a rather mundane use of his power."

"Never underestimate the power of a good smoke machine," Greg countered.

Three people walked on the stage but were shrouded in darkness. Two of them were carrying what appeared to be swords while the last was wearing a hat, clearly Luffy. Finally, Jamie's over the top tones filled the beach:

"There once was a man named Gold Roger, who was king of the pirates! He had fame, power, and wealth beyond your wildest dreams!" he announced. The stage lit dimly, revealing Tashigi and Zoro pointing swords at Luffy, who was cheerfully waving at the crowd.

"Before they hung him from the gallows, these were the final words he said," Jamie continued, now changing his voice deeper and more

menacing. "My fortune is yours for the taking, but you'll have to find it first. I left everything I own in One Piece!"

With that, Zoro and Tashigi raised their swords and slashed them down at Luffy's head. Zoro, even under dim light, looked utterly annoyed for doing this, especially with Tashigi. The second the swords were about to hit Luffy, the lights turned off.

"...that's not being hanged by the gallows...and that is rather morbid for a children's performance!" Doug pointed out.

"Are those REAL swords?!" Priyanka gasped.

"Ever since, pirates from all over the world set sail for the Grand Line, searching for One Piece, the treasure that will make their dreams come true!" Jamie concluded as Sour Cream started his music, feeling it as he went along.

"YO!" Steven jumped on stage. "YA-YO! YA-YO!"

"Is Steven about to rap?" Jenny Pizza asked from the crowd.

"Please tell me he's about to rap."

"That's a great way to get the truth out there. I have to admire that," Buck nodded.

*"Here's how the story goes: we find out about a treasure in the Grand Line, there's no doubt: the pirate whose eyes on it will sing:"* Steven rapped merrily. With that, he pointed over to Luffy, who grinned and pointed to himself.

*"I'll be king of the pirates! I'm gonna be king!"* he cheered.

*"His name is Luffy!"* Steven pointed to him.

*"That's Monkey D. Luffy!"* Luffy pounded his chest.

*"He's gonna be king of the pirates!"* Steven continued along.

Stretching his arms to swing off of the stage into the crowd, Luffy began to smile. *"I'm made of rubber!"*

"How did that happen?!" Steven asked in mock curiosity.

"Yo ho ho, I took a bite of Gum Gum!" Luffy laughed as the denizens of Beach City crowded around him.

"Is that all you can stretch?" Nanefua asked.

"I can stretch anything!" Luffy smiled.

"Oh, you dirty pirate!" she blushed.

At this point, Steven stood at the ready, prepared to introduce each and every member of the crew to Beach City. It seemed like the crowd was loving every second of it, except the Maheswarans and the Gems, who were more confused than entertained.

"...THIS is what Steven has been working on for the past five hours?" Pearl looked flabbergasted.

"It shows," Garnet observed.

*"His name's Zoro, he's just like a samurai; and a L-A-D-Y, Nami's not shy. Usopp's doing his marksman thing and Sanji's cooking for the would-be king!"* Steven rapped them off one by one. As he said their names, each of them took to the stage. Usopp was the only one who looked somewhat confident in himself; Zoro, Nami, and Sanji all burned red with embarrassment.

"...I'm not a samurai..." Zoro muttered to himself.

*"Up next is Chopper, a reindeer doctor and Damian's bombs are quite a shocker! Petrea's making chocolate treats and Genevieve's paintings are really neat!"*

"I don't know why you were all worried; they love us!" Damian whispered when they joined the others on stage.

"You're an idiot," Petrea shook her head as she waved.

*"Finally, Robin's an archaeologist, and with us she will help to assist; to get us away from these two. Smoker and Tashigi are out for our crew!"*

Robin came out and created hands on Luffy's head, which she high-fived as she walked by, causing the audience to laugh. Smoker, meanwhile, focused on the fact that this act was ending shortly and that he wouldn't be pestered about it any more.

With that, everyone was out on stage, though more than half of them didn't really know what to do or how to react to the awkward situation they were put in. But one thing was for sure: this was an interesting way to introduce themselves to Beach City.

*"Set sail for One Piece, it's the name of the treasure in the Grand Line! Gotta go, gotta go! Set sail for One Piece!"* Steven finished with a bang, pointing to Sour Cream, who cut off the music.

The crowd was silent for but a moment before they erupted in great applause. The pirates stood bewildered at the fact that these people seemed to genuinely find the performance interesting, especially since Steven made it up on the fly.

"That was totally a Steven production!" Jenny laughed. "He nails it every time."

"I have to say, for those Marines to be up doing that with their hated enemy, it takes real guts and dedication. I respect that they did this for us," Buck commented. "It says a lot about their character."

"Wow, did you see what that one girl did with her hands?" Peedee asked Ronaldo, who could barely form words at what he just witnessed. "Pretty weird, but cool."

"...weird?" Ronaldo stared intently at Robin, who was taking in the surprise applause. "...she's wonderful! All of this is wonderful!"

"That...was unexpected," Priyanka could not register an appropriate response. "I'm not entirely sure what to make of it."

Doug, however, shrugged. "Though I'm critical of the style of music he chose, even I admit it's catchy. Your son has a way with music, Greg."

Greg merely smiled and put his hands on his hips. "You did well, Steven. Say," Greg looked over to Pearl, who was making a weird

face. "What's wrong with you?"

The Gem shook her head. "I'm clearly not the audience for this kind of thing. I just don't see the appeal."

"On that we agree," Priyanka nodded and the two shared a rare laugh.

On stage, Steven noticed this and flashed a large smile to his crew. "Guys, they loved it! That went perfectly!"

"...that's one way to describe what we just did," Zoro started to run his temples in frustration as they all exited the stage.

"Smokey, great job setting the mood!" Luffy laughed and gave the Marine a thumbs up. "That was amazing!"

"Straw Hat," he gritted through his teeth.

"What's up, Smokey?"

"I hate you. So very, very much," he grimaced. Then he shot a look to Tashigi and continued to frown. "If you ever utter any word of this to anyone, I will make sure that you get demoted all the way down to cabin girl."

\*AGITR\*

As promised, Sour Cream got to achieve a dream he never knew he had: be a DJ on a pirate ship.

He had promised the Maheswarans that he would keep things age appropriate, as for the first time he was DJing at a rave with kids involved; specifically Steven, Connie, Peedee, and his own half-brother Onion. Honestly, his chiptune set up didn't really allow much explicit content, but it was reassuring for them nevertheless.

What was surprising, though, was the utter lack of familiarity these pirates had with electronic equipment as a whole. Luffy had absolutely no idea how even a simple generator worked as he set speakers and the mixing board to it. It was as if he was performing magic. The only two that seemed to understand what he was doing



was Nami and Robin, though to be fair the two Marines were not interested in seeing what he was doing.

"...so then I hook up the two Game Children to my computer and the sound chips can be used to generate the music!"

"Fascinating," Robin picked up the gaming system. "And this little machine was used to play those games like that Smash Pals thing that Steven has?"

"Yeah; it's pretty radical, ain't it?" Sour Cream nodded. Finally, he fiddled around with the system and turned it on. "And we are live!"

Music started to play on the Going Merry as he waited for people to start to dance. The Straw Hats didn't really do anything as they listened to the beats going on around them. It took Sour Cream a moment to realize that this was probably the first time they have ever heard synthesized music before...which was a great honor to the young DJ.

"This is going to be a life-changing experience for these guys...I wonder if they have glow sticks where they come from..."

\*AGITR\*

As the night went on, the party began to pick up. The pirates finally got a hang of the music and found their own rhythm to dance with, all under the watchful, judging gaze of the Maheswarans. This was hard for Luffy, who felt restricted on his own ship but knew what that he was doing was important.

"...this isn't a pirate party," he lamented as he tried to dance to the beat.

"What will make it a pirate party?" Steven asked, dancing with him.

"Liquor...putting stuff up your nose...anything fun! I can't stand not being able to stuff myself with Sanji's food! It's just not natural, I tell you!" Luffy frowned.

"Oh, I get it!" Steven said knowingly. "You don't want to give Connie's parents a reason to forbid her from being here, right?"

The pirate stopped dancing and nodded. "She's an honorary Straw Hat! I can't let her down like that!"

"Hmm...but Connie's parents should get to know the real you too..." Steven thought about it. "Let's ask the Gems! They are always good to talk to about this kind of stuff!"

The two passed by Ronaldo trying to spark a conversation with Robin, who was clearly disinterested in what he was saying, and Zoro, who was doing everything in his power not to run and steal a drink to make things interesting. Finally, they spotted Garnet off of the ship. She, the other Gems, Greg, Smoker, Tashigi, and a few of the other citizens were sitting beside a bonfire Greg had started.

"Pass the marshmallows, Amethyst," Greg was telling the Gem. "I think we are in business!"

"Uh...what marshmallows?"

"The ones you just shoved in your mouth, you glutton!" Vidalia laughed. "Now what are we going to roast?"

"We could always toss Garnet in," Amethyst pointed to her. "She could handle it."

"No chance."

"Well, if nobody is going to be constructive about this, I'll go raid the pantry for some more!" Greg got up just as Steven and Luffy made their way down the ramp. "Ahoy, kiddo! What brings you from the party?"

"We need advice!"

"Ah, advice from your old man?" Greg asked hopefully.

Steven blushed. "Actually, I was hoping to talk to Garnet."

Greg's face fell. "...oh. Well if you need me, I'll be inside, wallowing in self-pity."

As he left, Steven and Luffy ran up to Garnet, who was stopping

Amethyst from pushing her into the fire. "Steven. Pirate Captain Luffy. It looks like you are having fun."

"Kind of, but not really..." Steven admitted. "Garnet, Luffy really is feeling down about having to be on his guard with Connie's parents. What do we do?"

"Pirate Captain Luffy," Garnet began. "There is a difference from being on your best behavior and not being yourself. Just be you. It's okay to do things other people think are stupid, but just don't do something stupid."

Luffy and Steven looked to each other and cocked their head curiously. "Uh...what does that mean?"

"Don't get drunk."

"Oh!" Luffy nodded. "I get it! As long as we don't drink, Connie's parents will like us! Come on, Steven!"

The pirate grabbed the boy and dragged him back to the ship for some revelry. Looking at them run, Vidalia started to laugh. "This guy is really that tough for you to catch? He's such a goof ball."

"It's not about how he acts...it's about what he's capable of doing," Smoker watched Luffy run up with Steven, narrowing his eyes. "If I stop him before he starts up a storm of issues...the world will be better off."

"No more talking about work!" Garnet commanded. "Relax. You are too stressed."

"Says the living rock."

"Just for that, you are going to be last when Greg returns with the marshmallows."

\*AGITR\*

Returning quickly to the ship, Luffy ran straight into his quarters and brought out several chopsticks and straws. He started handing them out to everyone, much to a number of people's confusion.

"Luffy, what are you thinking?!" Nami asked, mortified at the sight of them.

"I'm gonna liven up this party! Here you go, Sour Cream!"

"What's up with the chopsticks?" the DJ inquired. "Are we eating MORE food?"

"Nope! Just follow my lead and let the music play!" Luffy laughed.

Sticking the sticks in their noses, Luffy started to dance with Steven in merriment. The onlookers looked on confused as the two continued to laugh and dance.

"Steven?! Why did you put chopsticks in your nose?!" Connie asked, shifting her gaze from her parents to her friends. The Maheswarans were indeed perplexed by this odd party habit and were talking to themselves about it.

"This is how pirates party! Come on, Connie! Join in!"

"Wow," Buck gripped his sticks tightly. "It's ridiculous yet hilarious at the same time. This is something that is going places."

"Yeah!" Lars chimed in, trying to impress Buck. "Great idea!"

"I'm not putting that in my nose," Kiki shook her head. "No way."

"Live a little, child!" Nanefua told her. "This is the most fun I've had in days!"

"Gunga! You look silly!" Kiki started to laugh, finally relenting and putting them up her nose and into her mouth.

All in the ship, nearly all of the youths of Beach City danced to the rhythm like Luffy at his goofiest. Looking on at the sight, the Maheswarans didn't know how to take the new fad.

"This...this is incredibly unsafe!" Priyanka started to analyze the situation. "What if they tripped with those things in their nose? It would seriously hurt them!"

"I wouldn't worry about it," a voice spoke from behind them. Jumping, they turned around and saw Robin with her arms folded. "It's just like any activity a person does. There is always a risk of getting hurt while doing it. I think they will be fine."

"I don't see how you are comfortable with your captain doing something like that!" Priyanka argued.

"I have the utmost faith in the Straw Hat crew. Yes, they are unorthodox and a bit out there, but they are good people nevertheless. Based on what you saw, can you say any differently?"

Just as Priyanka was about to open her mouth, Doug beat her to the punch. "Honey, look at Connie. She's not doing it."

It was true. Connie was standing with Genevieve on the sidelines, shaking their heads and fighting back laughter at the scene unfolding in front of them. Watching it put a smile on Priyanka's face.

"Well, what do you know?"

"It seems like your daughter is capable of making her own decisions about what is right and wrong," Robin pointed out. "You've done a good job parenting her."

"Yes...yes, we have," she smiled. "I suppose if she's smart enough not to do something so ridiculous and unsanitary, she can handle herself around them with parental supervision. Do you agree, Doug?"

He sighed and nodded. "As long as she gets her chores and lessons done, I see nothing wrong with it...yet."

The trio of adults watched on as Sour Cream started handing out glow sticks to the pirates, much to Chopper and Usopp's delight. The rave, though not a typical rave by any means, did its job well. The people of Beach City now got to know their new neighbors a bit better and the pirates got to see just who Steven spends his time with on a daily basis.

A good time was had by all...except for Petrea, who was stalked by Onion all night for reasons known only to him.

## The Day After The Rave

The next morning, Tashigi groaned as she woke up in an unfamiliar bed. Part of her wished the previous day was a dream, but she knew that was foolish. After all, she was sleeping in Steven's bed.

The half-Gem had insisted that Tashigi sleep on his bed while he set up a sleeping bag on the floor. After the festivities of the previous night, the Straw Hats decided to sleep on their ship until further notice while the Marines found themselves in the beach house with Steven. Tashigi was not surprised to see Smoker up and out of the couch. Where he was, she could not say. 'Perhaps he's meditating outside.' As for Steven, he was still sleeping, which she assumed was typical for him.

The woman got up and stretched. After splashing some water on her face to attempt to freshen herself up, she looked out the window to get a view of the beach. Instead, she was given a most unwelcome sight: Zoro training with his swords. Looking at him handle his blades irritated her beyond belief and, since she wasn't able to arrest him, she decided she was going to do something else about it.

Grabbing her own sword, she walked outside and moved toward the man. He was in deep concentration, focusing on his moves and his surroundings. As such, the second she made herself known, he practically jumped.

"Don't sneak up on me like that!" he snarled. Zoro looked her directly in the eye and then diverted his gaze downward.

"Don't treat me with such disrespect!" Tashigi folded her arms. "I want you to spar with me! Right here, right now!"

"No way!"

"Why?! You claim you won't fight me but it's not because I'm a woman! Is it my glasses? Is it my height? What is it?!" Tashigi pressed the man.

"...it's your face! I'd fight you if you had a different face!" Zoro announced angrily.

The Marine blinked in confusion. "What does that even mean?!"

"You look exactly like a friend of mine who died...the original owner of this sword," Zoro scowled and held up the Wado Ichimonji blade. "There! Are you happy? Now leave me be!"

"Are you really that childish?!" Tashigi started to laugh. "I am sorry for your loss, really I am, but would your friend respect you for choosing your opponents based on how they look? Is that how you want to honor her memory?"

"Stop it!" Zoro shouted now, disregarding the sleeping people all around him. "You don't get to say that!"

"Fight me and I'll stop!" Tashigi unsheathed her sword. "Fight me for her!"

"THAT'S ENOUGH!" Zoro charged at the Marine with all three of his blades, going at her with all of his might.

The two went at it for some time, both striking each other's blades as fast and hard as they could. Though they were not intending for any of the blows to be killing strikes, they were clearly giving it their all. They were so focused on their duel that they did not notice people surrounding them to watch.

"Woah, this is intense!" Lars, who left the Big Donut with Sadie to see what was going on, gave a low whistle, both impressed and intimidated at the display.

"...I can barely keep up with them," Sadie whispered. "How is that even possible?"

From the ship, the Straw Hats who were awake were following along with great interest. "My, they seem to really have it out for each other," Robin commented dryly.

"If that idiot causes us to get kicked out of Beach City for being unsafe, I'm going to kill him!" Nami twitched her eyebrow.

As it turned out, Nami was not the only one to worry about such things. Steven, upon waking up and hearing the commotion, went and grabbed the one Gem who could help him in this situation. "See? Pearl, they are fighting each other on the beach and I don't know why! I'm afraid they are going to hurt each other!"

"Steven, I'm sure they are just playing and...oh my," Pearl stopped her train of thought as she stepped outside and laid eyes on the swordsmen. "Their form...so precise...so delicate! This is incredible to watch! Steven, I knew Zoro was a great swordsman, but this..." She started to clap her hands. "This is art! Oh, to think what a little training would do for those two! I can't say I approve...but perhaps..."

Pearl smiled and she began to mutter to herself. Finally, she simply walked up to them, creating two of her staffs from her gem. In a quick motion, she blocked a strike from both opponents and disarmed them. The swords flew up in the air and Pearl jumped up to catch them, allowing her own blades to disappear.

"What are you doing?!" Tashigi yelled. "I finally got him to duel me without holding back!"

"I'd like to point out that the beach in broad daylight is not the best place to clash swords...or the safest," Pearl explained, acknowledging Sadie and Lars, who waved and went back to the Big Donut before they got roped into the action. "However, I wanted to say that I am incredibly impressed. Tell me, how would you both like to train with me while you are here? I have quite the few centuries of experience and I can tell one who is skilled in the craft when I can see them."

"What?!" Steven, who was standing on the sidelines, put his hands to his mouth. "That's amazing! You are going to be their sensei?!"

"If these two are up for it," Pearl smiled and acknowledged to two duelists, who were trying to take in what the Gem had just asked.

Tashigi looked to Zoro, who was in deep thought. She could tell that the man had gained a lasting respect for the Gem warrior just in the short amount of time they knew each other. Beyond that, she was taken down faster than any opponent she had ever faced by this



Gem.

There was only one possible answer: "When do I start?"

\*AGITR\*

"Welcome to the Ancient Sky Arena!" Pearl announced to Zoro and Tashigi.

The trio had teleported, awkwardly for the humans, to a partially destroyed, floating colosseum arena. There were three incredibly large pillars and rows of seats all around the stadium. However, it looked like there was no ground anywhere in sight and even more floating rocks littered the sky. As such, Zoro and Tashigi were both very taken back by the sight.

"Holy shit," Zoro whispered to himself. "THIS is a part of your planet?"

"It was an ancient Gem design that was used to pit humans for sport," Pearl elaborated. "It was here that Rose Quartz led some of her earliest battles against Homeworld...where her and I took on legions of Gems who wished to subjugate the planet."

"...wow..." Tashigi whispered.

"Now, in order for this to work, you need to cast aside your animosity for each other. This is not the place for you to take out aggression; rather, it is where you will hone your skills and iron out your flaws.

"Zoro!" Pearl snapped and pointed to the man. "You are arrogant in your abilities and cannot accept your own limitations. You rely too much on luck for your own good and, while that is commendable, it is important to be truly mindful of your surroundings all the time and not when the battle is almost lost."

The swordsman was puzzled as he tried to wrap his head around the perceived flaws that were pointed out to him. "...arrogant? Really?"

"Tashigi! You have wonderful technique, but it only comes out in

bursts! You need to stop doubting your abilities and become more confident about everything you do! If I can notice it, your enemies can as well. Do you understand me?"

"I...I do," Tashigi nodded and picked up her sword. "What do I do?"

"First, you must be properly tested. It is time for both of you to face the most dangerous opponent you will ever come across: me!" Pearl laughed to herself.

Twirling around and thrusting forward, Pearl's gem glowed as two blue replicas of Pearl appeared. They looked exactly like the real Pearl, with with soulless, dead eyes.

"Select level before combat can begin!" the two holograms spoke at the same time.

"Advanced mode, please," Pearl informed them.

"Level set! Do you wish to engage in combat?"

"Zoro, since I am more familiar with your skills, I would like to test Tashigi's abilities first, so please take a seat. Holo-Pearl Two, please wait over there until called for."

"Understood!" the hologram responded to the real deal.

Tashigi, staring down her opponent, gave a courteous bow and clutched her sword tightly. "I'm ready to engage in combat!"

"Then let the duel begin!"

\*AGITR\*

While Pearl teleported the swordsmen away, the other dimensional travelers found themselves busy in the small community of Beach City. Though several of the crew went out with a visiting Connie to a book store just out of town, the rest were all ready to spend the day with Steven.

"This is my computer!" Steven explained to Sanji. "You can connect to the Internet to find anything you want! I figured you might want to

look up some recipes from my world to take back with you!"

"Anything,' you say?" Sanji raised his eyebrow.

"Yeah! Even how to make crab cakes! It is one of the greatest achievements my dimension can offer!" the boy smiled. "I'm going out to Funland with the others. Come over and meet us when you are done! There is a roller coaster..."

"...yeah...sure...done..." Sanji muttered as he started playing with the technology.

"Yay! Roller coaster!" Luffy cheered.

But before they could leave, Garnet entered the room and looked directly at Luffy. The dark-haired captain looked from left to right before gulping. "Um...yes, Garnet?"

"I need help. I'm borrowing Pirate Captain Luffy and Captain Smoker," the tall Gem stated. She glanced around, searching for the Marine. As expected, he was nowhere to be found. "Hmm...playing outside with his rocks, I suppose..."

"Yeah," Steven nodded sadly. "I'm sorry that you can't come, Luffy...unless you need more help Garnet?"

"Nope. Just those two."

Steven's hopeful smile fell. "Aww."

"Wait? You need me? To teleport? On a mission?!" Luffy started to get excited.

"You know it." Garnet smirked, putting her fists on her hips.

"YOU KNOW IT! I'M GONNA GET SMOKEY! THIS IS GONNA BE GREAT!" the pirate ran out of the house faster than a speeding bullet to locate his fiercest foe.

"It's okay, Steven," Petrea patted the boy's back. "You've still got all of us. We are going to have a wonderful time...where are you going?"

Genevieve, who had stayed behind with the others, grabbed her paint set and started for the door. "I promised that Vidalia lady that we were going to paint today. We'll meet you in the park soon...maybe..."

The second she left, Damian stared at Petrea, Usopp, and Chopper. "...well, at least you still have us..."

Steven nodded, but then ran out the door and yelled out to Genevieve and, technically, to Luffy. "Just remember that we are having a movie night tonight! It's going to be the best night ever!"

Damian opened his mouth, but closed it. He assumed that he would find out what a "movie" was in no time.

\*AGITR\*

"Focus on your environment! See what your opponent sees and use it against her!" Pearl ordered as Zoro swatted away Holo-Pearl's blade. He was finding it harder and harder to keep up with the Gem construct.

Both Tashigi and Zoro were no match for Pearl's projections. However, with each consecutive match, the two picked up on openings that they hadn't realized before and were using them to their advantage. It was not enough for the humans, but they were learning nevertheless.

**"Oni-Giri!"** Zoro roared as the hologram jumped away to dodge it.

"No! You give yourself away when you call out your attacks! Your opponent can pick up on that and use it against you! Unlearn how you fight and make the dance a mystery to those around you!" Pearl shook her head.

The swordsman clenched the sword in his teeth and attempted to use his "Dragon Twister" technique without announcing it. As he twirled around, managed to land a striking blow into the projection, causing it to drop its blade.

"Challenger wins!" Holo-Pearl declared to the viewers. With that, she disappeared and Zoro collapsed to the floor panting.

"I...I did it!" Zoro grinned, dropping his swords. "I landed a hit."

"And a very palpable hit at that. That was good, Zoro. Very good indeed," Pearl offered a clap. "But you have much to do. Both you and Tashigi have steadily improved in the past several hours, but it will not do in the long run. Focus, practice, dedication, and a willingness to take what I have shown you here to heart will allow you to grow as swordsmen, regardless on what side of the law you may be. Your world is lucky to have two talented individuals such as yourselves."

She walked over to Zoro and offered him her hand. He accepted it and found himself locking eyes with Tashigi. The Marine gripped her blade once more and pointed it at Zoro. "Fight me again!"

"Are you nuts?!" Zoro shook his head in amazement. "Do you really want to do this now?!"

"More than ever!"

"Now, now," Pearl put herself in between the two before something occurred. "There will be none of that today. You both have fought valiantly, but it is still too early to gain an appropriate measure of your new approaches to the battlefield. Rest on it and relax. Jumping into things now will result in nothing," she turned to Tashigi, who bit her lip in anger. "You do not have to prove anything to anyone, Tashigi. Once you accept that, you can become stronger and more efficient."

The Marine thought about it for a moment. Finally, she sheathed her sword and gloomily started back towards the Warp Pad. "I guess we are done here."

"Hey!" Zoro called to her. "Hold it!"

Tashigi stopped and turned around. She regarded her foe and waited for whatever patronizing thing he had to say. "You did well back there," Zoro commented. "It looks like I may be screwed when we get back after all. Guess I'm going to have to make sure that doesn't happen."

The bespectacled young woman blushed with anger before she laughed. "I don't think that will make a difference."

"So you say," the green-haired man frowned. He started toward the Warp Pad as well, muttering to himself as he walked. "...damn it; I'd kill for some quality sake right now..."

As the two walked together, Pearl couldn't help but smile. "They are learning after all. Perhaps there is hope for their world yet...such elegance should not be wasted on petty squabbling..." Pearl chuckled before sighing. "...if only I could get them back TO their world. I think I have some work to do when I get back."

\*AGITR\*

"Hmm, it's got to be here somewhere..." Connie said as she looked around the book store.

Buddwick Public Library was, unfortunately, temporarily closed for renovations after a Corrupted Gem practically destroyed it several months back, though it was close to finally being reopened. Until then, dedicated citizens who wished to read ended up going to the Bay Book Store right on the outskirts of the community. It was here that Connie brought Nami and Robin, who were both eager to learn more about the world they were currently residing in.

"What exactly are you searching for?" Nami asked, flipping through a book on cartography.

"Les Misérables. I wanted to buy it for Captain Smoker. If he's not really into all of the fun stuff that we are probably going to do while you guys are here, at least he can read that instead of only balancing rocks and brooding."

"A noble idea, Connie," Robin smiled. "I have to say, your world has so many forms of literature. I could stay here all day and read everything in here."

"Not everything is quality material, Robin," Connie shrugged. "But I've got a bit of extra spending money. I'll buy you a book!"

"I refuse," Robin shook her head. "That is your hard-earned money."

It wouldn't be right accepting it."

"Friends buy each other stuff, Robin," Connie smiled. "I mean, I heard that you helped talk to my parents last night. If it wasn't for you, they might not have let me come out here today. Still, I don't really know much about you yet. What kind of stories do you like to read? Fiction? Nonfiction? Would you like a history book since you are an archaeologist?"

Robin was taken back by this small gesture. This might have been the first time that someone went out of their way to buy something for her and not to expect something in return. Yes, she had talked to Connie's parents, but Connie clearly wasn't doing this because of that. She wanted Robin to enjoy this world for what it was and nothing more.

It brought a smile to her face.

"I could actually go for some good fiction. Tell me, what would you recommend?"

Connie thought about it for a second and snapped her fingers. "You seem like the kind of person who would really enjoy the works of Edgar Allan Poe!"

\*AGITR\*

The fog did a wonderful job to add to the desolate mood of the rocky canyon. Cave-like holes littered the walls and giant mechanical devices were scattered all across the landscape. This was the Kindergarten: the Gems' personal hell. Yet, that is not to say that the Kindergarten was not entirely terrible. While the other Crystal Gems were born on the Gem Homeworld, this hellish environment was where Amethyst first came into existence. She was, as Pearl once claimed, the only good thing to come from this mess.

Garnet, Luffy, and Smoker found themselves here in this hellhole, alone but with a purpose. What that purpose was, only Garnet knew. "Alright, be on your guard. There is a very high chance that we will be ambushed."

"So why did you need both of us to do this?" Smoker asked, scanning the place. "Are we looking for something relevant to getting us back home?"

"It's a potential lead, nothing more," Garnet replied vaguely. "Nearly every time we have come here, Peridot has left something or done something that has made us one step closer to figuring out her endgame. I figured this would be something that would pass the time better for you than playing with your rocks."

He muttered something under his breath as Luffy started to stretch to one of the caves in the wall. "Hey! What is this place anyway?"

"This is the Kindergarten. Basically, it is a Gem incubation..." she stopped before rewording it into something that Luffy could understand. "Gems are born here. Look at the hole you are presently standing in. A Gem came out of there."

"Woah! That's freaky!" Luffy commented before thinking about it. "But I thought you guys were aliens or something..."

"That's a surprising observation, Straw Hat," Smoker growled. "I honestly would never have expected you to pick up on that."

"Most Gems are indeed born on Homeworld," Garnet told them. "But some were born here; Amethyst being one of them."

"Awesome!"

"Yes. Awesome," Garnet adjusted her shades. "Let's keep moving."

After a short amount of walking, the trio came across a large, square hole in the ground. Garnet frowned as she looked down it. "This is it. The control room."

"What's in the control room?" Smoker asked, legitimately curious about this area of the world.

"Mainly a computer terminal designed to maintain and supervise the Kindergarten itself. Peridot used it last time to do unknown repairs to the system, but I want to know if there was anything more to it. There has to have been a reason why Peridot is trying to use the



Gem fusion experiments..."

Just as Garnet prepared to start heading down, she paused and looked around. Soft movements were heard all around them. She summoned her gauntlets and looked around. "Gentlemen, we are not alone. I hope you are up for a fight."

"FIGHT!" Luffy looked like his birthday came early. "FINALLY! What do you say, Smokey? Person who knocks out more Gem monsters buys donuts?"

"First, you don't have money. Second, why would I waste time in an idiotic contest with you?" Smoker cracked his neck in anticipation.

"I'll take that bet, Pirate Captain Luffy," Garnet smiled. "But remember: when I eat, I like sprinkles."

"Oh yeah!" Luffy laughed.

Over the horizon, various Gem Fusion monsters appeared. A horrifying amalgamation of various appendages, they were truly a sight to be feared. However, this did not deter the trio as they jumped head first into combat with them.

**"White Blow!"** Smoker yelled. He shot his hand out and turned it into smoke. It collided on several experiments, crashing them into wall so hard, their physical form disappeared, leaving only fractured gem shards behind.

**"Gum Gum Gatling Gun!"** Luffy cried out, striking his enemies with a barrage of strong yet powerful rubber punches.

As for Garnet? She just started to plow through them. While she was doing so, she smiled a bit. 'My Future Vision showed me they needed this...Captain Smoker was getting too cooped up without having a true purpose here, while Pirate Captain Luffy was itching for a fight. By coming back to this terrible place, I can keep the peace between these two and bubble up more innocent Gems. I'd call that a win-win.'

\*AGITR\*

Funland was truly living up to its name. The pirates were having a wonderful time on the rides and attractions. From the roller coaster to the tea cup ride, it was shaping up to be a day to be remembered.

Now spending their time in the Funland Arcade, Steven was explaining to everyone the finer points of how to play arcade games. "So unfortunately, Garnet kind of destroyed the original Teens of Rage game, but we got a new one instead! It's called Virtua Teens of Rage!"

"Wow! These pictures are much different than the Sumy Dolphin games you showed us!" Usopp admired as he tried to play the game. "It's pretty sweet!"

"It's terrible!" a voice called out from behind them. "How could you say that about this...schwarbage?!"

"Oh! Ronaldo!" Steven turned around to acknowledge the teen. Sure enough, Ronaldo Fryman was standing right there, shaking his head.

"Steven; I know our options are limited, but the controls are rough, the graphics look like butt, and it is a hollow remake of a far superior game!" Ronaldo explained his position.

"Hey, you're that guy! The one with the theories on rocks!" Usopp's face lit up with recognition. "I loved your presentation yesterday!"

"Really? Well, it seems like pirates are a more civilized group of commandeers than the media has led us to believe," Ronaldo was clearly impressed.

"Ha! You'd be surprised how civilized and knowledgeable I am! Back in my world, I faced off against a terrible, ice fury who tried to dumb down children by feeding them candy! By the time I was done with her, the children grew up big and strong, claiming their loyalty to Captain Usopp the Brave!"

"That..." Ronaldo processed the tall tale with wonder. "That is phenomenal! You have to tell me more about your dimension!"

"Only if you tell me more about this world!"

"My dear friend, are you ready to learn about the weirdness that is hiding just under the surface of this city?" Ronaldo asked.

"I was born ready!"

The two began to walk away, leaving Steven without a partner to play his video game with. "...I guess I'll play Skee Ball with Chopper."

\*AGITR\*

Later on that night, everyone had returned back to Steven's house. The Gems, for the most part, had retreated directly into the Temple, while the Straw Hats returned to the Going Merry to freshen up for Steven's "movie night." Upon returning to the house, they saw Steven and Connie arguing about multiple small discs lying around on the floor while Tashigi merely watched.

"This is going to be their first ever movie. Are you sure this is the best choice for it?" Connie asked.

"Of course it is! I've been preparing them for this since they met me. Besides, they aren't ready for the complexities of the Dog Copter movies. How can we explain that his parents are actually...oh! Hey guys!" Steven stopped short of revealing a major spoiler and waved to his friends. "Did you all have fun today?"

"You have quite the charming community, Steven," Robin smiled.

"And one that attracts a lot of tourists. Vidalia and I made a whole bunch of money," Genevieve shrugged.

"What?!" the Straw Hats looked at the girl, who had managed to keep that fact to herself since she returned.

"How did you do that?!" Nami asked eagerly.

"We painted pictures of tourists as they walked by," Genevieve pulled out a bunch of money out of her pocket nonchalantly. "It turns out people will pay a lot of money for that kind of stuff. We needed money, so I figured it was a good use of my time."

The pirates grew silent as they considered what she said. "...at what point did the lazy painter become the breadwinner for us?" Zoro shook his head.

"By the way," Genevieve remembered. "Vidalia wanted me to pass on a message to you, Petrea. Apparently her son has some kind of gift for you that he found. I don't know what it is, but she said that it looks pretty interesting."

"...you mean Sour Cream, right?" Petrea asked hopefully. "...right?"

The painter gave a small smile, causing Petrea to bury her head in her hands. "Why does this kid keep following me?! He freaks me out!"

"...the sheer fear you have for this poor kid is hilarious," Damian laughed.

"To be fair, Onion is weird...very weird," Steven shivered a bit.

"Oh man, that reminds me! I've learned so much about your world from Ronaldo! Rock people...it blows my mind," Usopp admitted. "Say, what are you two up to? What are those?"

"We can't decide what movie to show you tonight!" Steven lamented. "It's your first movie night! It has to be special!"

"What ARE 'movies?'" Damian asked.

The two children thought about it means each gave their own explanation as to what movies were:

"They are basically plays recorded in a way that you could watch them anywhere, but with special effects and music that couldn't be replicated in real life!" Connie described it.

"A gateway to the soul," Steven smiled.

Nami bent down and looked at all of the discs. "...all of these 'movies' are part of the same story."

"That's the problem! We don't know where to start!"

"Steven here wants you to watch them in episode order, while I think you should watch it on release order," Connie shook her head. "I should have known you would be the kind of person to like Jar Jar Binks."

"He's cute and cuddly! How can you not find him funny?! That's like saying you hate the Ewoks!" Steven was very offended.

"...I'm not going to respond to that. Regardless, the best stuff is in the originals! Watch it how they were intended to come out!" Connie folded her arms. "Steven, you know I'm right."

The boy nodded, somewhat defeated. "You're right. Besides, this means we have a long time before we get to the third one. That one always gives me nightmares."

"I know what you mean. I had to argue with my mom that if I didn't watch it, it would damage my psyche not knowing the fates of characters I invested so much time in...though it did come in handy when we got sent to the Clone Wars..." Connie mused before adopting a dark look on her face, clearly remembering the incident.

The Straw Hats, not having any idea what they were talking about, merely watched the children and contributed nothing. "...wait, this is that thing you always referenced," Nami realized. "The thing with the rebels and the princess, right?"

"You remembered!" Steven smiled. "I guess it is important to start at the beginning; the real beginning."

"Though it looks like we are stuck watching the Special Edition BluRays," Connie sighed. "They went back and digitally changed the movie later on, which totally takes me out of the experience. I was hoping that we could pull up the good versions on Steven's computer, but it isn't working right."

"Yeah. It looks like I somehow got a lot of viruses on it," he said dejectedly. "Now I need to get it repaired. I don't even know how it happened. It was working fine when Sanji was looking up recipes earlier."

On the couch, the chef began to move around uncomfortably trying not to draw attention to himself. "Where's your dad and the Gems, kid?" he asked, laughing something off. "And for that matter, where's the shitty Marine captain? I haven't seen him since he came back with Garnet and fearless leader here."

"We had such a great time bringing down Gem monsters!" Luffy laughed.

"...I hate you," Zoro narrowed his eyes at his captain.

"I think dad and Smoker went out for a walk," Steven thought to himself. "I don't know where the Gems are. I'll go ask!"

The boy got up and went to the door leading to the Crystal Temple. However, just as he was about open it, it opened in its own revealing Amethyst. "Oh, you're all here. I'm not used to having this house so cramped...I kind of like it!"

"Amethyst, where are the others?! We want to have a really, really special movie night and I haven't really seen the Gems at all since they got back!" Steven begged her.

"Them? You aren't going to get a hold of them for awhile. After doing whatever training thing Pearl did with glasses girl and green hair, she and Garnet have been tinkering away at the Belly Bag Badge and the Rifting Stone for hours. It's so dull and boring in there," she slumped down on the couch. "Whatcha clowns watching anyway? Lonely Blade? Star Battlers?"

"They aren't ready for an anime like Star Battlers; we are planning to watch Star Wars! You in?"

Amethyst looked to the fridge and smiled. "You mean the one with the cinnamon bun-haired girl? Yeah, I'm game. We getting any snacks or what?"

"Good point! We can't have a movie night without snacks! Have you guys had any Fish Stew Pizza yet?" Steven asked. "It's out of this world!"

\*AGITR\*

Robin was not expecting anything from Steven's little "movie night." The boy and Connie were excited to share the moment with them, so she was happy to enjoy it. She had to admit that the innocence of this world was rather refreshing compared to the darkness found on the Grand Line and, as such, was curious to see how their entertainment held up.

However, she was not prepared for what she was about to witness.

It started exciting enough: an opening scroll, triumphant fanfare, a hero with a dream, a wise old mentor, and amazing effects that impressed even her critical eye. The movie reminded her of several novels she read in hiding as a child, but with its own spin on the formula. All in all, it was immensely fun...until the movie got real.

"There. You see, Lord Vader? She can be reasonable," the slimy Imperial Grand Moff with high cheekbones smiled. "Continue with the operation. You may fire when ready."

'What?' Robin thought to herself. 'They wouldn't...'

"What?!" the princess did a double-take.

"You are far too trusting. Dantooine is too remote to make an effective demonstration, but don't worry. We will deal with your rebel friends soon enough."

With all of the Straw Hats and Tashigi looking on in horror, they watched as the Empire's deadly weapon destroyed an entire planet in an instant. To them, it was no doubt an emotional climax that made them hate the villains even more. But for Robin...

For Robin, it was a grim reminder of the world she knew.

This Empire caused Robin to recall the worst of the World Government. Tarkin was Spandine (the man who was responsible for Robin's mother getting killed before her eyes as a child), Darth Vader was the personification of group of government assassins known as CP9, and Alderaan...Alderaan was poor Ohara, her home. This "Death Star" did nothing but cause Robin to flashback to their ultimate weapon: the Buster Call. It ravaged her home, murdered

countless innocents, and brought about the deaths of the few people who made her truly smile.

Looking over at Tashigi, Robin felt a burning rage inside of her. This woman worked to preserve justice in the name the governing body that ruined her life; that caused her to be on the run for the last twenty years. If the Gorosei did not order the Buster Call, she might have known her mother for more than just a few fleeting moments. If the Empire didn't destroy Alderaan, Princess Leia would be reunited with her father. If Darth Vader did not kill Luke Skywalker's father, he might have done more than just be a farm boy on a desert planet.

Yet, the look on Tashigi's face was telling. Unlike every other person watching the antics of two young males and a giant dog breaking a princess out of jail, she seemed to be as horrified as Robin was. Why was this so? 'What is going on in her head?' Robin wondered to herself.

As the movie concluded, much to thunderous applause by the innocent Luffy and Chopper, Robin could only give the weakest of smiles. Yes, she was happy that Princess Leia's people were avenged, but Robin's would never be. Unlike the Death Star, the Buster Call could never be stopped. Once it was ordered, it spelled certain death.

'If only things worked out in reality the same way they did in fiction.'

\*AGITR\*

As Robin correctly deduced, Tashigi was profoundly affected by the movie as well, but for different reasons: she associated the Empire with the Marines as opposed to the World Government.

Coming from a different viewpoint of the law offered her a different take on the matter. Tashigi was more appalled at the lengths the Empire would go to keep the people "in line." She knew of several Marines who would rather use intimidation and fear to bring pirates down, including most of the Admirals. Regardless, she had always known that there were radical Marines and had strived to be above them.



The problem was the public's perception of the Marines. Did the common people truly view them as an "Evil Empire?" Was she seen by the people as being like that Darth Vader guy or Admiral Motti? Did pirates see themselves as rebels fighting the bad guys? Or was she reading into it all?

She looked to the pirates and gauged their reactions to all of this. Most of them were enjoying the, admittedly well-made, spectacle and it seemed like their reactions were making Steven and Connie very happy as well. Even the cynical Nami and Genevieve were clearly in awe of this dimension's ability to produce special effects. But the odd woman out was Nico Robin, who seemed to have retreated under a false smile...something she hasn't noticed at first.

It made sense; of all of the pirates, she had the most reason to hate Marines. They called Ohara out on their rebellion before they killed themselves in whatever experiments they were performing to bring about the end of the world. Of course she would put the blame exclusively on Marines.

But she was a criminal and a murderer. No matter what, Tashigi could never forgive her for her actions in Alabasta...but what about the normal citizens of the world? All of the Straw Hats must have come from typical and ordinary villages and towns. What did THOSE people think of the Marines? For that matter, what did they think of their hometown pirates? Princess Vivi held them in high regard, but was she distrustful of the Marines because of her experiences?

All in all, this forced Tashigi to reconsider the Marine's approach to the people and to evaluate her own sense of Justice...

\*AGITR\*

Following the end of the movie, and with the promise of an even better sequel to be followed up with the next night, the Straw Hats began to discuss their takes on their first movie with Steven, Amethyst, and Connie, who was waiting for her mother to pick her up.

All the Straw Hats, that is, except for Robin.

Stepping outside and claiming to be grabbing something from the Going Merry, the former Miss Allsunday began to slowly hyperventilate on the beach. She was having a minor panic attack, brought about by the movie she just watched. The emotional trauma it uprooted was so raw that it took her back. She was not used to remembering her past so vividly and with so much detail.

"I must calm myself...this is rather unbecoming..." she panted, taking her time to walk to the pirate ship she now would view as home.

However, being on the run for as long as Robin had been caused her to pick up several habits, including a greater perception of her surroundings. As such, she was able to pick up on something that others probably would not...

There was something out there, watching the house and the people inside.

Robin scanned the area with hawk-like precision, searching for the thing that did not belong. If something or someone was threatening her nee friends and allies, she would not hesitate to remove the problem by any means necessary. Finally, she spotted it:

It was crouching down in the rocks around the house, using the moss to camouflage itself. She supposed that the creature itself had green skin and light green hair of some kind. However, that was all Robin needed to get a grasp on her.

**"Dos Fleur,"** she muttered, focusing her abilities to where the thing was. Stretching out with her powers, Robin used her new limbs to grab a hold of it, causing it to scream.

"What?! Where did these limbs come from?! Unhand me, you...you CLOD!"

Keeping the creature still, Robin made her way towards it, seeing it for what it was. Her initial perception was correct: it did have green skin and yellow green hair, but it also had some kind of visor over its face and a distinct gemstone on its forehead.

"Clod, eh? That's not nice."

"You! You are one of the humans who have been gallivanting around with the 'Steven!'" the green thing spoke with a whiny, feminine voice. "You all just appeared and are not leaving him alone! How did you do this?! How are you grabbing me?!"

"How I do things is none of your concern. What I want to know is this: why do you want Steven?" Robin interrogated.

"I'll never tell a low-life human like yourself! Don't you know who I am?!" she squirmed fiercely to try to escape Robin's grasp.

"If I had to wager a guess, you would be the infamous Peridot," Robin gave a sinister smile. "Ah, judging by your reaction, I am correct. So, why don't the two of us have a little chat about what it is that you are hoping to accomplish on this planet...and how Steven fits into it..."

# **The Best-Kept Secret In Beach City**

"So, you got to see a little action today, eh?" Greg asked Smoker as they walked near a storage facility. "That must have been right up your alley."

"It allowed me to let out a little steam," Smoker admitted. "Where exactly are you taking me?"

Upon returning back from the mission and grabbing a small bite to eat, Greg had insisted that he take Smoker out for a nice walk. He would not tell him where they were going, but Smoker found the idea better than sitting around with the Straw Hat crew enjoying something called a "movie."

"All good things to those who wait! Though I think you would probably like whatever the kids chose as their movie, you don't strike me as the kind of guy who would enjoy those kind of things. You barely made it through a bonfire," the elder Universe chuckled. "I bet your Marine nickname is 'Serious Smoker!'"

"It isn't."

"...that was a joke..."

Smoker looked around the small community. They had been walking for over twenty minutes and were about to turn on a road called "Beach City Highway." The roads were empty for the most part, but it was clear they were going away from the beach. Smoker raised an eyebrow and decided to get some answers. "Universe, what are we doing? This road is taking us out of the city. Am I going to get some answers here or what?"

"Can't get anything past you, can I?" Greg shrugged. "This road leads to the mayor's house. However, if we turn on this little side street off Route 1A, we will get to a magical place."

"...more Gem crap?" Smoker sighed.

Greg laughed. "It's not a literal 'magical place,' but it is one of the

best-kept secrets in Beach City. Ah, here we are!"

The two men looked out at a small building on a side road. It was rather modest-looking, but had a small flashing sign on the window that spelled out "Smiley's." Next to the sign was a small picture of Mr. Smiley, who no doubt owned the building. "'Smiley's?' What is this place?"

"It's a place to get away from it all...a place where everybody knows your name," Greg smiled.

"...you mean a bar," Smoker connected the dots.

"Eh, kind of. It's only open, like, two nights a week. It is just out of the city limits, so alcohol can be served here, but it's more of a place for the adults to relax. I figured you could use a good break from this insanity and take a load off of your mind."

The Marine shook his head and grumbled. "Does this mean I can actually smoke my cigars here?"

"Not inside. Technically, you can out here...but I don't recommend it. That stuff will kill you."

"I'll take my chances. Let's get this over with," Smoker made his way toward the door, which Greg held open for him.

The second the door was opened, a crowd of voices cried out in unison. "Greg!" There was Mr. Smiley behind the counter with Barbara Miller, Nanefua Pizza, and Mayor Dewey at the bar itself.

"Hey, look! Greg brought a friend!" Barb pointed out. "It's the cute one with the cigars!"

"That I did. Hope you guys don't mind," the elder Universe responded.

"Not at all, man. Pull up a chair and relax, Captain Smoker. We aim to please here," Mr. Smiley laughed and motioned to the few empty seats in the establishment.

Just deciding to go with it, Smoker found a nice chair on the side of

the counter. "Um...Captain Smoker..." Greg started to stammer.

"What?"

"That's my seat. That's always been my seat since Harold started this place up," Greg frowned.

"...you're joking."

"It's true!" Mr. Smiley nodded. "Greg is very particular about his seat. It's practically his second home."

"Heck, it's just as cozy as your van!" Barb laughed, causing the other patrons to join in, including Greg. Smoker, realizing that this was going to be just as stressful for him as staying with the Straw Hat, merely sighed and ordered a drink in a new chair.

"So...Mr. Smoker..." Mayor Dewey gulped and fidgeted around. "I hope you do not have any hard feelings about our little...disagreement yesterday."

"Why would I? This is your city. How you run it is not my concern or my problem," Smoker took a sip of the beer provided for him by Mr. Smiley. "This isn't bad. I'm impressed."

"I brewed it myself. Kind of a hobby...one of my many hobbies," Smiley admitted. "Between running the arcade, the amusement park, and being the activities director during the summer season, I barely have any time to myself. This place is a labor of love."

"It shows. It's rare to find good ale, even on the Grand Line," Smoker nodded. "What do I owe you?"

"Do you even have any money?" Mr. Smiley asked. "Don't worry about it. It's on the house."

The Marine looked from the ale to the smiling bartender and cocked his head. "What is with everyone in this city?" "I insist that I at least do something to pay for it."

"Oh! I know!" Mayor Dewey interjected. "This establishment needs a good cooler in case things get rough, if you know what I mean."

"...a cooler?"

"He means a bouncer," Greg filled him in. "Pay our dear mayor no attention. He likes to ramble on."

"Now, now, Universe. You don't get to go around saying that! You never know what danger might befall our fair city! We could use strong, powerful men like this gentleman here to keep trouble out," Mayor Dewey argued. "Smiley's is the kind of place I endorse: one of peace and prosperity..."

"You just like coming here because it is in walking distance from your house," Nanefua poked him. "Lazy bum!"

"I'll drink to that!" Barb raised her glass. "To peace, prosperity, and Bill here being a lazy bum!"

The adults all joined her in the toast, waiting for Smoker to do the same. Understanding that he had no choice (and did not want to waste good beer), he joined in and found himself beginning to relax ever so slightly. Perhaps tonight would be a night that wouldn't make him stressed out beyond relief.

\*AGITR\*

"So...how did you like the movie?" Steven asked coyly.

The half-Gem had felt something new watching the movie with his pirate crew. It was a newfound appreciation for the small things he had taken for granted in his world. To them, something as simple as a television was a whole new experience. By the same token, Steven found things like Den Den Mushis to be equally as enjoyable. It was a symbiotic cycle of enlightenment.

"IT WAS AWESOME!" Luffy, Chopper, and Usopp cried out in unison.

"I didn't know your dimension had all of these spaceships and laser swords and laser guns!" Usopp started to go on. "How have you kept these things a secret?!"

"Wait...you thought that was real? It was just a movie guys! It was

made up..." Steven started to laugh before stopping. "...though technically we do have spaceships and laser swords..."

"Actually, your dad's lightsaber kind of got busted during that fight with the blue-haired lady," Amethyst informed him. "Sorry to burst your bubble, little man."

"What?! I never even got to use it! I never even got to HOLD it!" Steven bemoaned. "I...oh, where are you going, Robin?"

The collective audience all acknowledged Robin at the same time, who had gotten up and moved to the door. She had a smile on her face, but looked somewhat distant. "I'll be right back. My shoes are starting to get a bit uncomfortable. I have a second pair on the ship."

"Oh," Steven frowned. "Okay! We will miss you!"

After the archaeologist left the door, the only one to look out the window to see where she was going was Tashigi. Noticing this, Steven decided to call upon her for her reaction of the movie.

"Um...it was very nice."

"That's it?" Steven asked knowingly. "Come on. You have to have more of a reaction than that."

"Yeah! You just saw some people get their hands bashed in!" Amethyst laughed. "That stuff is always great to watch in movies."

"I liked the music," Tashigi responded briskly, clearly a bit put off.

"...well, it's a start!" Steven smiled, hoping for the best. "How about...are you okay, Connie?"

All eyes turned to the young human girl, who looked even more distant than Tashigi. She was staring down at her feet and was breathing rather heavily. If she noticed that she was being stared at, she made no sign of it.

Steven gave her a poke, causing the Maheswaran girl to jump. "Earth to Connie!"



"Ah!" she exclaimed. "Steven...don't do that! You scared me!"

"I scared you? You are scaring me!" Steven countered. "You spaced out for a second...that's not like you!"

"I...it's nothing, Steven..." Connie muttered.

"It doesn't sound like nothing," Steven folded his arms. "What's going on, Connie? You can tell your jam bud anything!"

"Us too! We want to help!" Chopper added.

"Shhh!" Usopp hissed. "Let Steven work it out!"

"You wouldn't understand. It's nothing...really," Connie looked to the floor.

"Well now it's something! You can't go home feeling sad! House rules!" Steven stood his ground.

Connie looked into Steven's eyes and it took the boy back. They looked almost hollow...distant. It only when Steven's own eyes widened with shock that she snapped out of it and started to cry. Nami, being the closest to her after Steven, put her arm on her shoulder to try to comfort her.

"Oh Steven, I didn't realize it would happen...but watching the movie...it just reminded me of it!" Connie sobbed. "The helplessness...the pain..."

"What helplessness? What pain?" Steven asked frazzled. He had no idea what was going on and was trying to keep the peace.

"It was okay when I thought it was just a movie, but I was there, Steven! I saw them fight! They covered our escape, but I knew that they were going to die!" Connie continued on, not making sense to Steven.

However, it DID make sense to Amethyst. "Oh! You're talking about the robot guy with the lightsabers aren't you?"

"...Darth Vader?" Luffy asked.

Suddenly, it all clicked in Steven's head. "No...you mean General Greivous. You're talking about when you ended up in the Clone Wars, right?"

"That's the place!" Amethyst snapped her fingers. "We ended up in this deserted spaceship thing and got attacked by the robot dude. Thankfully, the Jedi were there and distracted him so we could escape, but Connie got shaken up by it."

Connie nodded and wiped away the tears. "I thought I had this under control! I know that it is normal for people to die and I just accepted it. But watching this again just brought back all the helplessness I felt watching the Jedi die...and the rebels in Alabasta too..."

"Wait, I thought you said that this wasn't real..." Sanji pointed out. "Did I miss something?"

"It's a Multiverse thing, bro. Don't think about it," Amethyst whispered.

"But Connie, you were so brave in Alabasta!" Steven exclaimed, keeping himself on the topic at hand. "You even talked me through my worries about all of that!"

"That doesn't mean I wasn't still feeling it, Steven!" Connie started to tear up again. "If I'm going to help you on your magical quests, this is just something I'm going to have to live with. I guess Star Wars is just going to be a sore topic with me for awhile..."

"Does this mean we aren't watching the next one?" Luffy asked.

"YOU ARE SO INSENSITIVE!" Nami got up and hit him. "This is NOT the time to be so selfish, Luffy!"

"Connie," Petrea spoke up. "I wish I could say it gets easier to cope with, but it doesn't. You are right that you will have to live with it, but you need to remember something. You need to know that you did the right thing in Alabasta and I bet you did the right thing with...I guess those Jedi people. So many people owe their lives to you and Steven. You can't beat yourself up over that."

Damian and Zoro tried to suppress laughter but were immediately spotted by the chocolatier, who was not amused. "Rude!"

"No...no, you're right, Petrea," Connie sniffled and accepted a tissue from Nami. "I know there was nothing I could have done, and if I did I would have messed up a timeline. It just hurts, you know? This is going to be a part of my life now, especially if Homeworld does attack us again or if we end up on another pirate adventure. My mother would just say that I'm growing up too fast..."

"We can't have that!" Steven shouted in utter horror. "Who is up for a pillow fight?"

"What?" Connie asked, taken off-guard.

"I don't think fighting when she is this traumatized is a good..." Nami tried to point out.

With a quick hit, Steven landed a solid blow on Connie with one of the couch pillows. The girl clutched her stomach and pretended like she was in pain, before grabbing her own pillow and started to whack Steven with all of her might.

"Take that, you wicked villain! Go back from whence you came!" Connie laughed through her tears.

"No! She's going to beat me into pillow submission! Help me, Luffy! You are my only hope!" Steven playfully begged.

"Help is on the way!"

As the pillow fight continued, more and more of the Straw Hats joined in, leaving Nami to stare at the sight with Genevieve. "...I would have bet anything that this would have made things worse."

"Again, you just have to roll with these things. Steven knows what he's doing," Genevieve shrugged. "I suppose we have to be a part of this too?"

"So it seems. I...wait, where did Tashigi go?" Nami looked around, realizing that one of their number was missing.

\*AGITR\*

"...I'm just a comet!" Greg finished singing much to the delight of the patrons of Smiley's.

As was apparently tradition for the bar, the night concluded with everyone singing one song on an old karaoke machine. Smoker looked at the machine and internally hoped that something would happen that would cause them to leave before he had to do something that would cause him unneeded stress.

The Marine was pleasantly surprised at how calm he was feeling. The past few hours had been one of the first times he felt peaceful since arriving in this world. Though they were overly friendly, they seemed to be more realistic than practically every other person he encountered here. He even learned that the one woman who called him "cute" was Sadie's mother.

There was a sense of innocence over the entire town. Though the patrons were all of the legal age, Smoker counted that everybody drank maybe two beers each at the most. It seemed like they cared more about indulging Harold Smiley's hobby than getting drunk, which Smoker respected. The drink was delicious and should be admired for its taste and not just what it could do to the mind.

The only one who he had reservations about was Mayor Dewey, who seemed too ineffectual to be a proper mayor. He did not seem capable of managing real issues beyond talking to the people. Smoker assumed that it just came with the territory of living in a world where you did not need a police force thanks to the weird magical ladies who lived in the temple on the beach. It didn't change his perception of the man, but it made sense.

"Universe, fantastic pipes as usual!" Mayor Dewey clapped.

"That was one of your old songs, right?" Barbara asked. "You used to try to force me to listen to your old albums when I was on my route."

"Hey, somebody had to listen to them!" Greg defended himself. "Mr. Universe still has it baby!"

"Sure you do, Greg. You keep telling yourself that. Still, since we got through your song in one piece then I guess our officer of the law is up next on the mic!" she countered.

Just as Smoker was about to object, he was beat to the punch by Mr. Smiley. "Now Barb, don't force the man if he doesn't want to. He got enough of that with Steven the other day. This is a place to relax and be yourself...though I do thank you for not smoking those cigars of yours man."

"...it's the least I could do," Smoker blinked in surprise.

"Come on! It's tradition!" Barb whined. "We all do it even if we look like idiots!"

"...it's a tradition that only started a few months ago when Greg found this old thing in his storage facility. It's my bar and my rules."

Smoker felt gratitude toward the man for not having the issue pressed. It was refreshing to say the least. He found himself finally able to put the Straw Hat out of his mind, just for a moment, and to enjoy another person's company. Greg, for all his flaws, was not that bad of a person, despite who he allowed his son to be friends with. He did not consider the man a pirate; though he accepted the fact that he worked with them due to the circumstances involving the Alabasta incident.

"Well all," Mayor Dewey announced. "I believe it is time for this politician to hit the road. Buck should be getting home from his friend's house and I'd like to be there for him. Same time next week, citizens?"

"You know it, Mayor Dewey," Mr. Smiley waved goodbye. "I'm going to close up shop as well. Anyone have any objections to that?"

"...I swear this is the strangest bar I have ever been in," Smoker found himself smirking.

"From you, I'll take that as a compliment."

As the mayor opened the door, he took a big breath. "Say, it smells like someone is having a bonfire tonight. I hope they have their

permits..." Mayor Dewey chuckled.

"That's a bit strong of a smell for a mere bonfire," Barb took a sniff, being the closest to the door.

The patrons walked outside to see what was going on. Smoker, a learned man, realized what was going on immediately. Smoke was billowing off near the ocean, meaning only one thing. "Miller is right. We need to get to town. Now! That's a legitimate fire!"

"Fire?!" Mayor Dewey panicked as they began to run. "The nearest firemen aren't going to get there in time before it spreads to the peer!"

"Then you better hope your Gems can live up to their fame and save the day," Smoker muttered.

"They always do...I just hope that nobody gets hurt!" Greg cried. He started to pant as he ran. "Gosh, I wasn't prepared for this. I knew I shouldn't have had that second beer!"

Leading the pack, Smoker kept his eyes on the rising smoke. His calm evening ruined, he assumed at once that the Straw Hats were responsible. 'Hopefully Tashigi is doing her job and keeping everyone under control...'

\*AGITR\*

While the pirates were playing around inside, Tashigi had taken the opportunity to slip out of the house to search for Nico Robin. She did not trust her on the best of days, but there was something off about her that made her concerned. She seemed too distant and out of it. Was she just affected by the movie, or was there something more?

The Marine clutched her sword tightly. She was confident that not even the most perceptive members of the pirate group had noticed her disappearance, let alone the acquisition of her weapon. She did not know if she would have to use it, but she was ready in any case.

She looked around and did not see a trace of the woman...at first. It took her a moment but she finally spotted her among the rocks. She appeared to be wrestling with something...or someone!

"What is she doing?!" Tashigi asked herself as she ran toward her. "Has she gone mad and attacked someone?!"

She unsheathed her sword and prepared to catch her off-balance. However, the Marine ended up tripping on one of the many rocks that was in her way. Robin looked up from her captive in complete surprise.

"What?!" Robin uttered before getting cut off.

The person who she was wrestling with took the opportunity to hit Robin with all her might, catching her off-guard and causing her to hit the ground. It was then that Tashigi realized who Robin was dealing with:

Peridot, the Homeworld Gem that the Crystal Gems were after.

"Thanks for the distraction, you clod!" the Gem creature laughed. She started to twirl her fingers on her left hand in an incredibly fast motion, spinning them like a propeller. She began to rise up in the air and started to fly off towards the city and away from her. Tashigi was not about to have any of that.

"Come back! Now!" Tashigi ran after her, jumping on the rocks in order to gain a better height advantage. It would not be long before Peridot would be out of her range, so she needed to move fast.

"I think not! I've already been set back by one annoying human creature! I don't have much time and I refuse to have my last moments on this insignificant pebble be wasted arguing with you!" Peridot shouted, pointing her right hand at the Marine. The index finger began to glow a bright green and Tashigi realized that she was about to be fired upon.

**"Dos Fleur!"** a voice called from behind Tashigi.

A set of arms appeared on Peridot's arm and forcibly moved her hand away from Tashigi. The Marine turned around to see a panting Robin concentrating to save her from the Gem. However, it was not fast enough to stop the laser blast from firing. The two women and the Gem watched as it flew across the beach and hit the Beach

Citywalk Fries building. Almost immediately, the building began to catch on fire as the debris from the attack began to crumble into it.

"There might be people inside!" Tashigi stammered, running to the slowly burning inferno.

Robin, on the other hand, was taken aback by the damage done to the shop. 'The gas must have been left on...' she deduced quickly. However, the damage was done in more than one way. Utilizing the distraction, Peridot flew away, once again avoiding capture. This led to Robin's actions being all for nothing except for destruction and pain.

"What the heck was that noise?" the voice of Usopp called out as the door of the house flew open. The Straw Hats, Amethyst, and the kids all stood witness to the slowly growing fire.

"Not Beach Citywalk Fries!" Steven started to panic. "How did it get on fire?!"

"Now isn't the time to ask about 'how!'" Damian shouted, taking charge of the situation. He seemed oddly determined in a way that was surprising for most of his companions. "Amethyst, Gems can't control the water, can they?"

"Uh, Lapis Lazuli can..."

"But can YOU?" he pressed.

"No!"

"Crap!" he muttered. "Can you handle fire?"

"I can't...but Garnet can. I doubt she knows about this. Her and Pearl are really caught up trying to figure out what 'P.C.M.' means or whatever the Belly Badge said..." Amethyst started before Damian cut her off.

"I don't care what they are doing! That can wait! You go and get Garnet out here now! I'm going to help Tashigi down there. If we do this fast enough, we can stop the fire from spreading down the pier!" Damian yelled as he ran down towards the fire. "Everyone, try



to set up a perimeter so nobody gets hurt! Come on, people! Move!"

The pirates took a moment to just stare at Damian as he ran, clearly taken back by his change in demeanor.

"...what the...?" Sanji cocked his head.

"There isn't time to question it! You heard him: let's go!" Nami shouted and began to follow the bomb man.

Everybody sprang to action as Amethyst ran inside to get Garnet and Pearl. Running towards the fire, Steven and Luffy began to ask Robin to give them the rundown of what exactly had happened.

"I saw Peridot hiding near the house looking for Steven and confronted her...but Tashigi thought I was attacking a pedestrian and caused her to escape, setting the shop on fire in the process..." Robin explained bitterly. "This wasn't supposed to happen..."

"Peridot?! Peridot was here?" Steven asked. "Why was Peridot here?!"

"Damian is right, Steven! We need to focus on the fire...and the people!" Connie pointed out. It was true; slowly people started coming out to view the scene, the Fryman family. The youngest Fryman started to cry hysterically.

"Stay back, sons!" Mr. Fryman was holding back Peedee and trying not to freak out. "It will all be alright..."

"Alright, dad?! Look at the shop! How could this happen to the shop?!" Peedee wailed at the top of his lungs. Then he grabbed Ronaldo's shirt and started to shake him. "DID YOU LEAVE THE GAS RUNNING AGAIN?!"

"I don't know! I was asked to come in to help close at, like, the eleventh hour! I can't help that dad interrupted my very important day with a pirate and didn't expect me to have other things on my mind at work!" Ronaldo argued in his defense, completely apathetic to the burning wreckage in front of him.

"Other things on your mind?! The shop is on fire and you had

OTHER THINGS ON YOUR MIND?! WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU?!" Peedee yelled at his brother.

"You're that Marine girl, right?" Mr. Fryman asked Tashigi. "What happened to my shop?"

"I...I..." Tashigi was at a loss for words. "It was..."

"It was an evil Gem," the voice of Garnet announced. Amethyst had managed to collect the rest of the Crystal Gems and they surveyed the scene.

"I don't see Peridot anywhere..." Pearl searched around. "We are going to need to move fast if we are going to catch her."

"What about the shop?!" Peedee pointed to the fire.

"Don't sweat it!" Damian called out, making his presence known. "We will have it out in a jiffy!"

The boy just stared at him and frowned. "Don't you, like, start bombs and explosions? What do you know about putting out fires?"

"More than you know," he rebutted him. "Garnet, I know you want to get Peridot, but I need you to shapeshift into a large container and surround the fire completely. Without air, the flames will die out."

"Sound logic," Garnet nodded.

Using her rarely utilized shapeshifting abilities, Garnet followed Damian's instruction. The flames slowly flickered away to nothingness before it spread, leaving the charred remains of the Frymans' shop free from further damage.

"That was some quick thinking there, bomb man," Garnet patted his back. "Good work."

"That was only half of the work..." he frowned and examined the little shop. "Most of the supplies are unusable, but the structural damage isn't as bad as it looks...we can salvage some of this..."

"Salvage? We can actually salvage this?" Mr. Fryman looked

amazed.

"Perhaps...the machines are totally fried...no pun intended...the important thing is that nobody got hurt," Damian sighed and put his hand on the man's back. "I'm sorry this happened to you, man."

"I am too..." Mr. Fryman looked to Ronaldo and shook his head. "I am too..."

"HOLD ON EVERYONE! THE MAYOR IS HERE!" the voice of Mayor Dewey echoed throughout the street.

Everybody turned to acknowledge the pack of adults, led by Mr. Smiley and Smoker, running to the former sight of Beach Citywalk Fries. Trailing behind everyone was Greg, who was wheezing all the way over.

"Hey, Smokey!" Luffy waved to his foe. "Where have you been?"

"That doesn't matter right now! What did you do?!" Smoker yelled angrily. "I know you had to have had a part in this!"

The pirate cocked his head in confusion as Tashigi stepped forward to explain the situation. "Captain, Straw Hat Luffy was not even outside when the fire took place. It was the rogue Gem called Peridot. She shot the building and flew away."

"If she just flew away, she couldn't have gotten too far. This might be our chance to catch her once and for all!" Pearl laughed triumphantly.

"What about the Frymans' shop?" Steven asked intently. "I thought we were helping them!"

"I'm afraid there's not much that really can be done tonight.." Damian frowned. "In the morning I'll help you guys sort through stuff and clean up some of the debris. We can clear up the boardwalk before the tourists start coming out."

"I appreciate the help," Mr. Fryman went to shake Damian's hand. "Insurance will cover a lot of the damage, but we will be out of commission for a bit. Anything to move the process along helps."

"Don't worry about being out of commission," Kofi Pizza, who had arrived to see what the commotion was about. "You and your family will be cared for. We are here to help."

"Me too, man," Greg nodded.

"And the Gems will help in the morning!" Steven chimed in.

"Steven, we have very important work to do!" Pearl frowned. "We need..."

"Steven's right," Garnet cut her off. "We will help in the morning. However, this is a chance we cannot afford to lose. Everyone, go back to your houses! There is a chance a dangerous creature might be on the loose!"

"A dangerous creature you say?" Ronaldo asked excitedly. "This sounds like just the thing my blog needs!"

"No Ronaldo!" Mr. Fryman snapped. "No blogs! No monster hunts! Until we are back up and running, you will be focusing on your family and the responsibilities you have been neglecting."

"But dad..." the teenage stammered.

"No buts either! You will be out here bright and early helping with the heavy labor! Now you heard the magical lady. There is no point in mourning anymore...we need to move on for now," the elder Fryman bit his lip and sighed.

One by one the citizens of Beach City departed the scene, albeit reluctantly, leaving only the pirates and the Gems on the boardwalk. Damian continued to examine the wreckage as everyone listened to Garnet.

"We know for a fact that Peridot is in the area. If we all split up, we can cover more ground. Amethyst, take to the skies."

"Up and at them!" Amethyst cried as she turned into a bird and took flight.

"What about me?" Steven asked.

"Wait at home with Connie and an adult. Her mother will be arriving shortly," Garnet reminded him.

"But what about when she goes home?" Steven tried again.

"Young man, it is way past your bed time. There is no use fighting it," Garnet folded her arms, signaling Steven's defeat in the argument.

"I'll stay behind and watch them," Robin offered, beating the cowardly Usopp to the punch. "Peridot may try to come to the house again."

"My thinking exactly," Garnet nodded.

"I'll stay behind too!" Tashigi added hastily. "I'd rather for Steven to be watched by someone capable..."

"Capable?" Robin scoffed. "You mean like how capable I was to have had Peridot captured before you let her go?"

"What is she on about?" Smoker frowned.

"I...I..." Tashigi stuttered.

"You know what you did? You caused an incident that destroyed a man's business and livelihood! If not for the good people of this city, that family could truly be suffering more than they are now!" Robin snapped. "You let your preconceived notions about who I am blind you and have failed to see the consequences of your actions!"

"Guys, I don't like where..." Steven tried to interject before getting cut off by Tashigi.

"My actions? What right do you have to judge me on MY actions?! Yes, this situation might have been brought about by me, but you diverted the shot!"

"I was trying to save your life!"

"Less than a week after you tried to end it! Why wouldn't I be suspicious of you?! You were Crocodile's partner, you are the

Demon Child of Ohara, you...why are you laughing?!"

The normally stoic and reserved Robin started to let out a clearly forced laugh. It caused the already sour mood to worsen. The Straw Hats did not dare to interrupt for fear of facing her wrath. Regardless, everyone was concerned about the situation as a whole.

"Ohara? You still bring up Ohara despite everything you have learned about the World Government? Oh you poor, naive child," Robin laughed. "Did Alabasta not teach you anything?"

"What is that supposed to mean?!"

"You said the World Government is covering up the Alabasta incident, did you not? What makes you think that was the first time they did so?!" Robin spat at her.

Tashigi opened her mouth to respond but found she had nothing to say. She stared into Robin's eyes and saw something behind them: fire. She was not making this up, or if she was then she was doing a very good job hiding it. This was clearly something she felt strongly about. It was then that the harsh truth swept over the Marine:

With those twelve words, Tashigi lost the argument.

"Are you okay, Robin?" Luffy asked, clearly concerned for his archaeologist.

"I am fine, captain," she responded bitterly. "Garnet, I will take the area down by the destroyed docks. It's clear I shouldn't be watching Steven now. If I find anything, I will let you know. Where would you like to regroup?"

"Meet back at the house if you cannot find her," Garnet frowned. "But we will still need..."

"Hey, you guys go out and search for what's her face. Steven can chill with his cool dad," Greg spoke up. "It's not like I can help anyway. Besides, I'm sure Priyanka would rather see me than anyone else."

"He's got a point there," Connie shrugged.

"I'll stay behind too," Genevieve offered. "This way someone else is there if Peridot tries to come back to the house."

"You just don't want to walk around," Usopp frowned.

"...maybe..."

"Then it's decided! Alright crew; let's go bag us a Peridot!" Luffy yelled as he charged away on the boardwalk with no thought whatsoever.

"Don't lump me in with your crew, Straw Hat!" Smoker shouted. After he realized it was a useless gesture, he sighed and began to grumble to himself. "I should have known that I wouldn't be able to have a calm night..."

One by one, Garnet gave the Straw Hats, Smoker, Tashigi, and Pearl orders of where to look while Greg took the kids back to the house. Slowly everybody left to search for the elusive Peridot...

All but one.

"What the hell are you doing, Tashigi?" Smoker sighed as he doubled back to find his subordinate stationary and staring at the ground.

"I...she was right," she whispered. "I am directly responsible for everything that has happened here. If I didn't interrupt her, this shop wouldn't be a smoldering pile of ash. If I didn't interrupt her, Peridot would be captured. If I didn't..."

"Enough already!" Smoker bellowed. "Damn it, Tashigi! Look at yourself! You are getting yourself worked up because of a pirate..."

"A pirate who was doing the right thing for once!"

"Yes! These things happen, Tashigi. Does that excuse the terrible things she has done in the past? Of course not! She will answer for her crimes in good time, but for now just accept the situation. You said it yourself: you messed up. Deal with it!" Smoker just shook his

head in irritation. "Your mistakes make you stronger. Never forget that and you will be a better Marine than half of the idiots in charge. If you let your mistakes define you, you will never amount to anything. Be defined by what you do, woman! Now, what are you going to do?"

Tashigi hesitated for a moment and wiped tears away from her eyes. She looked at Smoker with a renewed determination in her eyes. "I'm going to make it up to these people by helping with the cleanup and locating that Gem!"

"Damn right, you are. Now, get your ass in gear," he motioned for her to follow him. "I'll be damned if I let a pirate find her first."

"Yes sir!" Tashigi saluted. She started to walk before pausing one final time. "Um...captain?"

"Just don't, Tashigi," he told her.

"What?"

"Don't think about what is no doubt going on in your head. You are a Marine. Focus on making the world a better place for the people, not for questioning the past," the Marine ordered.

"But...but could she...?" Tashigi tried once more, hoping for some kind of resolution.

"It doesn't matter. What matters is not letting what you think might have happened happen again. Get moving, Tashigi. That is an order."



# The Contrivance Factor

The primitive human dwelling was still as Peridot waited in the shadows.

Though she was hoping to obtain the "Steven" in a quick, easy manner, the presence of unfamiliar humans complicated the matter. The entire situation was spiraling out of control. First her ship crashed, then all attempts to contact Homeworld failed, and now her only hope to repair the Homeworld Warp Pad was being withheld from her.

Did these clods not realize that this planet was doomed?!

The Cluster would emerge any time now and she, Peridot, was trapped with no conceivable way to vacate the planet...save one last-ditch effort. She had heard from the Lazuli that the human known as "Steven" had some kind of unknown healing properties. If she could harness that ability, she could leave this Gem-forsaken planet and be spared from a horrible fate.

If things weren't bad enough, Peridot learned that humans apparently had abilities that were unknown even to her. She was surprised to see that the unknown dark-haired human could sprout an extra set of limbs onto her own arm enhancements. This would no doubt prove to be a problem if she could not get her priorities straight. However, this did allow for an easy distraction by blowing up the other human dwelling, allowing Peridot to formulate a plan.

Doubling back and hiding under a soft, squishy surface inside of the dwelling, Peridot stayed incredibly quiet as the flawed Amethyst ran in and collected the other "Crystal Clods." It was a risky gambit, but she was running out of options. With all of them distracted by the burning dwelling, she would remain undetected inside until she could get the "Steven" alone and bring him to the Warp Pad.

As she expected, the "Steven" did return before the Gem traitors, bringing with him another, rounder human and two other smaller humans with longer hair. She peered out and watched as the four

conversed, seemingly waiting for another human to arrive and take away one of the smaller humans. It was incredibly tedious work, but Peridot knew it would be worthwhile in the end.

Finally, seemingly hours later, the promised moment arrived: the other human entered the dwelling and took the other one away after a lengthy conversation. This would have to be her chance: it was now or never.

After a little bit of tidying up, the "Steven" made his way into an offshoot of the dwelling to do something called "brushing my teeth." This evened the odds considerably. The mighty Gem left her hiding spot and made her way to behind the rotund, larger human and did the first thing that popped into her mind: she knocked him out using her arm enhancer.

"Ugh!" the human moaned as he hit the floor, attracting the attention of the smaller, long-haired one.

"Mr. Universe, what happened?! I...oh no. You're Peridot," the human said, seemingly unsurprised and with a lack of emotion in her voice.

"I am, little human. Let me be and I will leave you unharmed," Peridot tried to be reasonable. The human was much smaller than her, which meant she had an advantage over the situation.

"Somehow, I doubt that," the creature frowned. "Say, can you pass me that thing right there?"

Peridot looked down at a long stick with some kind of thistle sticking out of the tip. It was next to a circular plate with globs of colors splattered on it. The Gem picked it up and examined the material. "Hmm...I cannot detect any combustible properties in this...'thing.'"

"It's just paint. I'm a painter," she pestered. "Can I have it?"

"Sure, little one. I'll let you have it," Peridot grinned wickedly. She raised her enhanced arm to strike her before hearing the door to the offshoot open up. Finally, there was her target: "Steven."

"Peridot! Don't hurt her!" "Steven" ran out, only to nearly trip on the

unconscious form of the other human. "Gah! Dad!"

"Ah. 'Steven.' I am going to humbly request that you come with me!" Peridot made a swift motion and grabbed the other human, tossing aside her "paint." "If you do not comply, I will be forced to let the human 'have it.'"

"Fine, I'll come with you! Just don't hurt Genevieve!" Steven pleaded with her.

Peridot looked to the struggling human known as "Genevieve" and then to the "Steven." "Hmm...very well. However, since I do not wish to alert your 'guardians,' I'm afraid this 'Genevieve' will have to join us as well!"

"Woo hoo," "Genevieve" cheered weakly.

Peridot grabbed the "Steven" by the arm and dragged him over to the Warp Pad, clutching "Genevieve" with her other arm. When the three of them were in place, she activated the device, sending them to her destination: the Homeworld Warp Pad.

"...this place is beautiful," "Genevieve" looked around in what Peridot perceived to be awe. "I want to paint it."

"Yeah? Well you are not here to paint! You are here to fix the Warp Pad!"

The little one looked around and grimaced. "Um...I don't think I'll be of much help to you there."

"Not you, you clod! I am talking about the 'Steven!'" Peridot let the half-Gem go and pointed to the Warp Pad. "I am all out of options. I have no way of repairing this Warp Pad and I need to get off this planet immediately! I know you healed Lazuli's gem. I need you to do whatever you did again and get this operational!"

"I...I don't know if I can do that!" "Steven" stated nervously.

Peridot sighed and charged up her finger blaster. "Don't make me use this!"

"Gah!" "Steven" took a step back. "Okay! Okay! I'll try...but I have to warn you, this doesn't always work...especially when I am scared!"

The half-Gem licked his hand and patted the Warp Pad. All three of them stared intently at the device, waiting for something to happen. Finally, "Genevieve" stated the obvious. "Did anything happen?"

"No! Nothing happened at all! Why didn't anything happen?!" Peridot started to panic.

"I'm sorry!" "Steven" explained. "It doesn't always work! I...what are you doing?"

The half-Gem was referring to Peridot unexpectedly letting the "Genevieve" go as she sat down and curled into a little ball. The true extent of her situation had finally hit home. "You were my last hope...THIS was my last hope. This is it. I'm dead. My gem will be shattered into a million little pieces when this planet dies..."

"What?!" Steven asked sharply. "What does that mean?!"

"This planet is doomed, 'Steven!' DOOMED! The Cluster has been incubating for thousands of years and it is finally ready to emerge!" Peridot began to cry wildly. "I don't know what to do anymore!"

"'Cluster?' What's a 'cluster?'" "Steven" asked.

Before Peridot could explain any further, the Warp Pad began to glow brightly, revealing several figures. It was an assortment of various humans and, as usual, the Crystal Clods.

"No! Not you! Not now! Why must you keep pestering me?!" Peridot wailed, already defeated and now becoming agitated.

"It's Steven and Genevieve! We found them!" the Pearl announced.

"That's Peridot, right?" one of the humans wearing an odd appearance modifier on its head asked. "I'm gonna kick her face in!"

"You are getting better with the profanity," the Pearl beamed. "Regardless, your scheming is over, Peridot! You have no place to run and you are more than surrounded!"

"It doesn't matter, you Crystal Clod! We are all dead! DEAD, I TELL YOU!" Peridot frantically tried to tell them. Perhaps they would stop trying to catch her for a single nanosecond and listen to her. It might prove useful at this point to explain the situation and use it as a bargaining tool.

"What is she on about?" a long-nosed human asked. "Why are we dead?"

"She's stalling," a light blue-green-haired human cracked its knuckles menacingly. "It's an old, desperate trick."

"I'm inclined to agree with Captain Smoker," the permafusion created her gauntlets and stared her down. "This ends now!"

"Yeah! **Gum Gum Pistol!**" the human with the appearance modifier yelled. To Peridot's amazement, the human's arms stretched right at her!

"Humans can do that too?!" she shouted as she jumped out of the way.

"He's no ordinary human," the Pearl jumped up in the air and tried to slice Peridot with her staff, keeping the poor Gem moving.

"No! Stop! She's trying to tell us something!" "Steven" was shouting as Peridot was getting ganged up on.

"Would one of you clods please listen to him? He...gah!" Peridot tried to get their attention but found herself unable to move. It seemed like the human from earlier in the night had created another set of her arms and was immobilizing her.

"You aren't going anywhere," the human smirked.

Looking down with regret, Peridot knew there was only one final way to escape this situation. She detached her leg enhancers and started to twirl her fingers so she could propel herself away.

"**1 Kilo!**" a human with a strange tool shouted. Amazingly, Peridot found herself face to face with her in the air. The human grabbed onto her and smiled.

"Get off of me!"

"I think not. **10,000 Kilos!**"

At once, Peridot found herself plummeting to the ground at a rapid speed. She braced herself as she hit the ground, painfully aware of what was about to happen:

It was then that Peridot's world went dark.

\*AGITR\*

He could not sleep. He had too much on his mind.

It was gnawing at his very soul. All he wanted was for it to be the morning. All he wanted to do was go over to Steven's house. He knew the way. He had been there before...several times, even.

But he was impatient.

His mother had forced him to stay home with her when the explosion happened all those hours ago, even though he knew that *she* would have to be there. She, the object of his desire. It was a new feeling for him, this surge of curiosity and wonder that came about when he saw her. It made him smile.

It had made him want to see her.

When he first saw her, something clicked inside him. He tried to talk to his mother about it, but she had spent most of the day at Steven's house...with her. It wasn't fair that he had to go home with his brother...but it mattered not. He had a plan and he set out to accomplish it.

Upon arriving back at home, he did what he did best and slipped away from his brother and his friend unnoticed. He doubled back to the pirate ship that was now docked on the beach and began to explore it. It was huge, bigger than he expected. There were so many interesting things on board it, but he couldn't find what he was looking for. He wanted something to give her that showed that he cared. He knew nothing about her at all, and his unattended excursion on the ship offered no answers. As such, he was prepared

to just make her a card and call it a day...but then he decided against it.

He wasn't even trying to look around, but something compelled him to examine the bottom of the ship. He couldn't explain the feeling, but it was as if he was meant to look there...like there was a reason for it.

The hull of the ship looked very worn out and damaged. However, it was seemingly patched up consistently enough to keep it seafaring, at least for now. He knew a lot about ships from his father so he could see that this vessel needed a major overhaul before danger befell upon it. Initially, that was his intended gift to her: to have his father help save the ship.

Then he caught glimpse of something different...something that even he knew shouldn't belong.

Wedged in a crack in the ship was an odd, spherical object. It looked vaguely like an apple, but it couldn't be. The skin was too ornate for it to be any fruit that he was aware of. To be fair, he hated fruit with a passion, but even he knew what an apple looked like.

Regardless, he knew that this was it. *This* would be his declaration of friendship. *This* would be the signal that started something beautiful.

He brought the mysterious object home and tried showing his brother, but found he was too distracted preparing for the night's festivities. Finally, his mother returned, but she too was not able to look at his new find just yet. Even she, the one whom he desired to be friends with, was too busy at the dance that night. No matter how many times he tried to find her. she managed to slip away.

Tomorrow, he had resolved. He would show them tomorrow.

But tomorrow had turned into today and the time was not right. His mother had left again to paint with one of the visitors, but had promised to pass on the message that he had a gift for her. Yet, here he was in the dark hours of the night, unable to sleep and unable to concentrate.

But then something happened: he saw the one with the straw hat run right by his house.

He prized himself to be a smart boy and quickly deduced that if one of them were running wildly down the street, the others would follow. This would mean that Steven's house was empty...an opportunity he could use to his advantage.

He wrote up a small note and opened up the blinds of his window. Down he went to the ground level with his package and card in hand. If he made good time, he could beat her back there. This was his chance to impress and he was not about to mess it up.

After a short run, he made it to the beach where Steven's house called home. He opened the door and found an interesting sight: Steven's father asleep on the floor. A curious place to take a nap to be sure, but his family was always a bit weird.

He searched around to find the perfect hiding place for her. After a few moments of thought, he figured it out. He knew she liked chocolate so he set up the ornate gift and the card inside of a cabinet, ready to be seen by her. Feeling satisfied with his choices, he left to return home to get some much-deserved sleep.

After all, there was no way that this idea could go wrong.

\*AGITR\*

"Ugh...I should NOT have had that second beer..." Greg moaned as he stirred off the floor.

His head was killing him and he didn't know what hit him. Did he really pass out? When did he get on the couch? The last thing he remembered was talking to Priyanka and then...nothing. The only other thing that he was aware of was that his head was stinging.

"Okay...this is weird," he said as he stretched. "I don't see Steven anywhere...or anyone, for that matter..."

He began to look around the house and concluded that he was indeed alone. "I really hope he is with the Gems...I can't stand him being missing again. I...gah, my head is killing me! That's it. I need



some aspirin or something."

Greg moved over to the cabinets above the stove and looked through them to find some kind of medicine that could help him out. Though Greg was the one who did the grocery shopping for the house, he had no idea what he was working with in terms of stock. He wasn't sure exactly what kinds of things the Gems left in cases like this, but he knew that Pearl carried around traditional bandages. Keeping something like aspirin in the house was not that far off of a concept.

Finally, he opened up the topmost cabinet and saw a most peculiar sight: an apple with all kinds of swirls on the skin. Greg was curious about the fruit and picked it up. "Hello. What have we here?"

He held it and turned it around. Greg was not entirely sure if he was just seeing things due to his swelling headache or if the fruit actually had swirls on it. Regardless, he failed to notice a small note that had fallen beside it.

"Hmm...I haven't eaten anything since before all the commotion...and it's not good to take anything on an empty stomach," Greg weakly reasoned with himself, rubbing his head with his free hand. "At this point, anything will do. It's not like Pearl would let anything bad be this accessible to Steven..."

He took a bite into the fruit and swallowed it. Immediately the man started to gag and cough, hurting his head even more than before. "Oh gosh! What the heck...how old is this thing?! Pearl is usually on top of stuff like this!"

He opened up the garbage can and threw away the remnants of the fruit and poured himself a glass of water to try to get the taste out of his mouth. "Jeez...I've eaten bad fruit before but that was terrible. I feel worse than before...and I still haven't found the aspirin!"

At that moment, the Warp Pad began to glow and several figures returned to the interior of the beach house. Much to Greg's disgruntled relief, Steven was among them. However, if he didn't know any better he would swear that they were one short...where was Zoro?

"Guys, I really think she was serious about warning us about something! We should tal...Dad! You're okay!" Steven was saying before he noticed his father.

"Mostly, sport...if I can get my head to stop spinning and this taste out of my mouth," Greg gagged as he tried to keep balance on the counter. "Man, I feel weird."

"You shouldn't be walking, Greg," Pearl scurried over to him. "We found you passed out on the floor with a giant bruise on the back of your head. Peridot knocked you out and kidnapped Steven and Genevieve here..."

"What?! Is that what happened?! That explains the swelling, I suppose..." Greg looked around for the rogue Gem and could find no trace of her. "She got away again?"

"Not this time, baby!" Amethyst laughed. "My girl here poofed her good!"

"Stop; you're making me blush," Petrea knocked Amethyst in the shoulder.

"You got her? That's great!" Greg smiled before losing balance for a moment.

"Mr. Universe, you need to sit back down. You look disoriented," Chopper ordered, rushing to his side. "You may have suffered a concussion!"

"Probably...but really, I just feel like I might have food poisoning or something," Greg admitted as Chopper began to look over him. "I felt bad waking up, but worse after eating that rancid apple you had in your cabinet, Steven."

"Apple? What apple?" Steven asked curiously, his mind taken off of Peridot momentarily.

"You know...the weird looking apple that Pearl must have overlooked..." Greg explained, hoping it would make sense. "It probably got lost in the shuffle when you vanished, buddy. I'm sure the doc here has something that can get me back to normal."

"But...I didn't have any apples," Steven revealed.

"Sure you did," his father pointed to the garbage can. "See for yourself. I threw away most of it."

Thinking little of it, Greg allowed his mind to drift away for a moment while Chopper examined him. It was incredibly late at night and he was exhausted. However, if he did suffer a concussion, he knew going to sleep right now was not a good idea; especially if he was about to throw up from food poisoning.

"What kind of an apple is this?" Steven asked as he looked in the garbage. "It's got some kind of weird swirls on it..."

"What?!" Smoker, Tashigi, Petrea, and Damian yelled.

"It couldn't be..." Robin whispered.

"Swirls?!" Pearl jumped and ran over to him. "What do you mean by 'swirls?!'"

"Not so loud!" Chopper barked.

However, the reindeer's wishes were ignored when Steven pulled out the remains of the fruit from the garbage. The sight of it was enough to freak most of the pirates and Pearl out even more.

"That is impossible...you don't have these here, do you?!" Smoker asked sharply.

"They don't! That is what Steven said when we met him!" Petrea backed away in horror. "But it's right there!"

"It doesn't make any damn sense! How...why...?!" Damian started to pace around before looking at Greg. "My god, which one is this?!"

"Greg," Pearl rushed to his side and held the fruit, which she continued to examine with intense curiosity. "Where did you say you found this?!"

"Why is everybody freaking out over some bad fruit?" Greg grumbled. "It was in that cabinet. I was searching for aspirin and

found that instead. What? What did I do?!"

Pearl opened up the cabinet and picked up a small piece of paper and read it over. "*Beautiful girl, I think you are as cute as this apple. It isn't chocolate, but it looks just as sweet...sincerely me?*" What in the world does that mean?!"

"Chocolate?" Damian asked.

"Beautiful?" Nami repeated.

"Oh no. Oh no, no, no..." Petrea started to panic even more than she was. "Please tell me I'm wrong."

"I guess we know what that interesting gift was that Vidalia was talking about..." Genevieve stared at it in awe.

"Vidalia? What?" Amethyst asked in confusion.

"ONION!" Steven yelled.

"Hold on! Why is everyone getting worked up? What did I eat? What is going on?" Greg got up despite Chopper not being done.

"I don't know how this happened...or how it COULD have happened..." Robin started carefully. "But..."

"You ate Devil Fruit, man," Damian blurted out. "An honest-to-god Devil Fruit."

"...what?"

"WHAT?! THAT IS AWESOME!" Luffy jumped over and smiled. "WHAT IS YOUR POWER?!"

"Dad ate a Devil Fruit?!" Steven stared in amazement. "That is so cool...but wait! Who will go swimming with me in the ocean?! Oh, curse you fate, you double-edged sword!"

"Hold it...how the hell did that Onion kid GET a Devil Fruit? That makes no sense whatsoever! It is literally impossible!" Usopp shook his head.

"I guess we will ask him in the morning...but I have some ideas..." Garnet looked at Greg, checking out his body from afar to assess any potential changes.

"P.C.M.?" Pearl asked worryingly.

"Exactly."

"What the heck IS P.C.M. and what does me eating that fruit mean?" Greg asked, getting more confused by the moment.

"It means that you now have some type of extraordinary power at the cost of your ability to swim," Sanji explained. "Holy shit, this is intense."

Suddenly, Pearl began to move her hands incredibly fast, causing her gem to glow. After a moment, a book materialized from it and landed in her hand. "Perhaps we can get some answers from this *Devil Fruit Encyclopedia* the king gave me...let's see..."

The room was silent as Pearl sped through the book looking from one illustration after the other. Finally, she stopped and looked from the apple to the drawing. "You have got to be kidding me..."

"What?! Don't just leave me in the dark! For crying out loud, give me something!" Greg begged. "This is already too much for me to comprehend as it is! All I wanted was some aspirin!"

"Greg, I don't know how...but not only have you somehow miraculously consumed one of the rarest items on the Grand Line...but you have consumed a fruit known as the 'Rhythm Rhythm Fruit...'." Pearl shook her head and laughed.

"...wait, what?" Greg asked.

"It means you have the ability to create music from out of nowhere...apparently by manipulating sound waves," Pearl read. "There are apparently multiple types of musical related Devil Fruits...fascinating..."

"Hold the phone. Now, hand the phone to me," Steven interjected. "Dad can create music?"

"I can create music...without instruments?" Greg asked.

"The musician from another dimension ate a music based Devil Fruit...what are the odds?" Tashigi asked.

"What are the odds indeed..." Smoker glanced over to Garnet. "This is one hell of a coincidence, isn't it?"

"A coincidence isn't quite the word I would use...I'm thinking more of a contrivance..." Garnet frowned. "We need to look into this."

"What are you saying?" Smoker asked. "That someone is manipulating events right now to play out how they would like them?"

"So I fear," Garnet nodded. "Skipping the U.G.R.V., ending up directly in Beach City, Amethyst being revived so easily, catching Peridot right after returning, and now an improbable situation like this...this has his name written all over it."

"Who?"

"Uncle Grandpa."

# The Cleanup On The Boardwalk

The following morning, Greg found himself back in his van, yawning like he did every day. He blinked a few times as he got acclimated with the world once more. "Ugh...I had the strangest dream..."

Upon explaining to the pirates just who the enigmatic Uncle Grandpa really was (much to their general confusion), the Gems made the decision to call it a night and regroup in the morning. Before they retreated into the Temple, they made sure to retrieve the remains of the Devil Fruit that Greg unknowingly ate. Of course, Greg had yet to truly comprehend what had happened mere hours before and the profound effect it would no doubt have on his life.

"Did...did that really happen?" Greg asked himself, staring at his hands. "Did I really eat a Devil Fruit? Can I really make music...by myself?"

A thought struck him; he should attempt something so incredibly simple that it was genius. "Party on, Greg," he chuckled to himself.

He imagined a guitar in his hands. This was not that hard to do, especially for a seasoned pro like Greg. Raising his hand dramatically, he prepared to play an air guitar unlike any other.

Finally, he began to pantomime strumming the chords to "Stairway to Heaven," half-expecting to just seem like an idiot pretending to rock out in his van. But then something amazing happened: the sweet sounds of Led Zeppelin filled the air, seemingly from nowhere. Greg, too in awe of what was happening, did not think too deeply about the science behind his newfound ability. He did what any self-respecting man would do in his situation:

He finished the song, happy as could be.

\*AGITR\*

Inside of the beach house, Steven had requested to cook everyone a nice breakfast before they began a hard day's work with the Frymans. Damian, declining, woke up and headed over to the

wreckage immediately, seemingly to get a head start on the cleanup, prompting Tashigi and Smoker to do the same. As such, the topic of conversation turned to Damian while the Straw Hats were introduced to the joy of *Crying Breakfast Friends*.

"Say, Glum Glass, what did the Spanish librarian say to the Uranian doctor?" a sad-looking piece of bacon was asking a glass of milk.

"I don't know, Bawling Bacon. What?" the milk replied.

The two breakfast items looked at each other and began to cry with all of their might, prompting much confusion from the Straw Hats.

"...I don't get this 'cartoon' at all," Robin frowned. "Why are they crying again?"

"Because they are friends!" Steven called from the kitchen. "Friends cry sometimes. Just look at me!"

"...he's not wrong," Usopp agreed. "So, back to the matter at hand. What the hell is going on with Damian? He's acting so...weird."

"Everything has been a bit weird lately," Nami tapped her finger to her cheek. "Last night was just the culmination of an incredibly interesting week. I still haven't grasped just what the Gems were talking about with that 'Uncle Grandpa' person."

"It seemed simple enough to me!" Luffy chimed in. "That guy likes to help kids and can change the world!"

"...I think it is a bit more complex than that," Nami sighed. "If this person is warping the fabric of time and space right now, who is to say that we are in control of our actions? How do we know if we aren't being subtly influenced to do specific things, like watch this show or going to help the Frymans? Who's to say that the building being shot at wasn't truly Peridot's doing but Uncle Grandpa's?"

"You are making my head spin! It is so confusing!" Chopper complained.

"You know the elephant in the room that we haven't discussed yet?" Sanji pointed out. "That shitty swordsman still hasn't come back



from last night."

"It honestly doesn't surprise me," Nami shook her head as she returned her attention to the crying piece of bacon. "He gets lost on a regular basis. Give him some time and I am sure he will be right back. Heck, maybe Uncle Grandpa WILLED him to be lost."

"Have you lost your belief in freedom of choice?" Genevieve asked.

"Maybe! I don't know! I just want some answers!"

"Well, I have the answer to all of your prayers!" Steven exclaimed excitedly as he hurried up to his lost where the Straw Hats were huddled together. "I've got pancakes!"

"Pancakes! Alright!" Luffy jumped down excitedly, ready to gorge himself.

"Luffy, the plate on the counter is yours! The other plate is for everybody else!" Steven called to him. "I...oh man! I love this episode! Here is the best part!"

"*Why won't you let me do this for you, Sniffling Croissant?!*" a talking egg cup wailed. "*I...I mean...let her...do this...?*"

"Such poignant drama!" Steven smiled.

"...is it? It is hard to tell," Robin continued to frown.

Just then, the door of the house opened up and Greg ran in the house, giddy as could be. His son diverted his path from the counter over to his father, embracing him in a giant hug. "Dad! How are you feeling?"

"Like a million bucks, Shtoo-ball!" Greg returned it while ruffling his son's curly hair. "That fruit thing? It actually worked! I'm a one-man band...again!"

"You've gotten control of your Devil Fruit powers already?" Petrea asked with interest. "It took me weeks to figure out just how to control my weight...and I have only just learned that I can change the weight of other people! That's incredible, Greg!"

"I have no idea if I have 'control' per-say, but I can do a mean air guitar!" Greg demonstrated for the pirates, playing a quick riff out of nowhere.

Steven's eyes immediately turned to stars as he started to clap for his father. "Oh man, that is amazing! I can't believe that you have such a cool power!"

"I know! Just wait until I show the guys at Smiley's. They are going to have a blast with this!" Greg smiled. "Though I do have a question for all of you...something that has been bothering me since I thought about it..."

"...yes, Greg. You can take a bath," Petrea sighed, remembering what Steven asked her when he first learned about the limitations of Devil Fruit.

"...oh, thank goodness. Wait, how'd you know I was going to ask that?" Greg asked, bemused and relieved.

"Kyahahahaha!" she chuckled. "Call it a hunch."

"So be it."

"Are you hungry, dad? I made pancakes!" Steven pointed to the plate that was not being devoured by Luffy, though he was eyeing it nevertheless.

"Did you now? I could use all the energy I could get to help out with the hard work," the elder Universe sat down and grabbed a fork. "The Gems still lodged up in their Hobbit Hole?"

"Yeah, they haven't come out all night," Steven shrugged. "Last night kind of freaked them out."

"I can imagine. Look at the bright side: you guys got Peridot, right?" Greg asked hopefully. "That should be a load off of your minds."

Steven adopted a strange look and turned his head toward the temple door. "Yeah...a load off of my mind..."

"Steven is concerned that Peridot was trying to tell us something,"

Genevieve explained. "I think it was called the 'Cluster' or something."

"She was just trying to buy time," Robin stated simply. "On that, I agree with Garnet and Captain Smoker."

"I don't know...if only I could be sure..."

\*AGITR\*

As the morning turned to midday, the cleanup truly began. Much to Mayor Dewey's disappointment, a section of the boardwalk had to be closed in order to accommodate the debris. Besides the Frymans and the Marines, Kofi and Mr. Smiley were both helping as much as they could. Mayor Dewey eventually came along later with Buck and Sour Cream in tow, but wasn't working as much as reassuring concerned visitors that the beach was still open. Damian had taken charge, as he was surprisingly knowledgeable about carpentry and safety regulations. It was a surprising sight to see him order around the likes of Smoker and Tashigi, but neither of them complained about it. The goal was clear: help the Frymans as fast and efficiently as possible.

The Gems had yet to make good on their word to come out of the Temple to assist, but the Straw Hats were making good progress in their absence. Petrea was attempting to use her awakened powers to make the loads lighter for everyone. It was working to a degree. She could change the weight of one object at a time, which was typically given to the likes of Peedee or Ronaldo, who was putting in a legitimate effort to right his wrong.

This did not make Steven feel any better about the situation, as Garnet made a promise the night before. As such, he was planning on going straight to them using the one room he tried to avoid if he could help it: his mother's room.

Before he could act on such a thing, a car pulled up in a parking spot near the work. Steven spotted the car and was overjoyed. He recognized it as Priyanka's car, which could only mean that Connie was with her. To his surprise, there was an additional person in the car: Zoro.

"What the hell?" Sanji cocked his head in confusion. "Where the hell did that moss-head come from?"

"Maybe he got sent to the hospital?" Chopper, who was in his human form, posited. "Isn't Connie's mom a doctor?"

"Hey guys! Wow, you got so much of the debris moved already!" Connie exclaimed, running over to the group.

"Yeah! We've been working almost nonstop all morning," Steven waved to his friend. "So...whatcha doin' with Zoro?"

"That is an interesting story, Steven," Priyanka got out of the car to survey the area. "But I am not sure if it is as interesting of a story as this."

"It's all related," Zoro handwaved it. "What do you want me to do?"

Luffy pointed to Damian, who was delegating a task to Ronaldo. "Talk to him. He's the bossman here."

"...you're joking," Zoro started to laugh. He stopped when he saw Damian walk Ronaldo over to the remnants of the fryer and helped him lift it up. "...I'll be damned."

"My husband found this one wandering the streets near our neighborhood around four in the morning as he was heading home from his shift," Priyanka acknowledged the swordsman. "He figured that it was safer to bring him with us than let him wander around aimlessly. I was sure he was drunk...it turns out he was just lost."

"His lack of direction is legendary," Usopp commented as he put down some rubble. "It's kind of hilarious."

"...or maybe he had no control of it at all..." Nami narrowed her eyes suspiciously.

"I've said it once and I'll say it again: try not to think about these things," Genevieve sighed. "This is hard work."

"Have you actually done anything?" Usopp accused her. "I have only seen you carry that one set of frying pans."

"I know! I live such a hard life."

The doctor continued to look around, interested in the level of dedication and teamwork all of the parties were putting into righting the wrong that befell the Frymans. "Where are your guardians, Steven? I'd have thought they would be here to assist."

"...I did too. I was just about to go ask them that myself!" Steven finally started walking toward the Temple, Connie and Genevieve following behind him. Suddenly, the boy stopped and turned to Priyanka. "Wait a second! Dr. Maheswaran, would you be able to do me a favor?"

Connie's mother raised an eyebrow in surprise. This might have been the first time Steven had made an outright request of her. "I don't see why not. What can I do for you?"

The boy motioned for her to bend down to his level. He began to whisper in her ear, causing the woman to nod. "That sounds rather sweet of you. Do you know what you wanted to do?"

"I made up a list with Connie yesterday! It's in my room. I'll go get it before I get the Gems!"

"Take your time. I'd like to lend a hand here. It seems only natural that a doctor be on hand to assist in case there are any issues. Do you have any idea how easy it is to throw out your back these days?" she smiled. "Now, who is calling the shots here?"

Steven and Genevieve pointed to Damian, causing the doctor to walk over in his direction. With that, the kids made their way down the pier and to the Temple, talking along the way.

"So...what exactly are you having Connie's mother do, Steven Universe?" Genevieve pried.

"It's a surprise!" Steven smiled. "I'd tell you, but it would require a lot of explanation...and I know how much you love that..."

"Stop. You win," she relented.

"Did I miss anything last night?" Connie inquired. "You didn't text me

to make sure I got home. That's not like you."

"Connie, saying you missed a lot is an understatement," Steven began to explain everything that occurred after Priyanka came and picked Connie up from Steven's house, starting with Peridot and ending with Greg.

"Your dad ate a Devil Fruit?! Your dad can make music out of thin air?!"

"I know! Cool, right?"

The kids entered the beach house and made their way to the Temple Gate. Steven put up a finger and ran to beside his bed, where he grabbed a piece of paper and some money and shoved it in his pocket. He returned to their side and closed his eyes, allowing his gemstone to glow a vibrant pink.

"Ninety-nine...forty-four...one hundred percent pure!" Steven chuckled as the door opened, revealing an expansive yet empty pink room. Genevieve looked on in amazement as she took in every pink and white cloud that adorned the sky. "This is my mom's room, Genevieve. It can change itself into anything I ask it to!"

"...what was that? I'm sorry, I'm still getting used to the fact you have a cloud room in your house..." Genevieve stammered, lost in its beauty.

"Room!" Steven called out. "I'd like to see Vivi again!"

Upon command, the blue-haired princess materialized in front of the trio, causing Genevieve to jump. "Gah! How did the princess get here?"

"It's not really her," Connie sighed. "It's some kind of cloud projection...trust me. I know."

"Yeah, but I have to be careful what I ask the room to do. It is more literal than Pearl," Steven admitted as Genevieve poked at the Cloud-Vivi. "Still, we are here for a reason. Room, we need to go see the Gems...the REAL ones. I know you can open a path to get to them..."

At once, a door appeared in the middle of the clouds. The half-Gem bowed in gratitude and scurried toward it. "Thank you! Come on, guys!"

"...do we have to leave?" Genevieve asked weakly. "This place is just so..."

"We can come back later if you want!" Steven motioned for her to follow him. "Let's go!"

"...fine..."

The door led to a giant room filled with enormous pillars of water surrounded by a lake. Connie and Genevieve took in the sight of another fantastical room, mystified by its wonder. Connie was the first to realize that there was no floor, only solidified water.

"...are...are we walking on water?!" Connie fought back the urge to scream. "How are we not falling in?!"

"Magic?" Steven shrugged. "Hey! We are in Pearl's room! Cool!"

"This is where Pearl lives?" Connie continued to look around, taking in every detail. "I never guessed...I mean, how could I guess..."

"Connie," Genevieve whispered. "Do you have that phone thing with you?"

"...yes..." she nodded, still in awe.

"Please take one of your pictures of this. This is too much to take in...it is so beautiful," the painter fawned.

As the two girls took pictures of the room, Steven searched around for the Gems before realizing that they were on top on the central waterfall. Waving and motioning to be silent, Steven pointed to the Gems and the trio slowly and quietly made their way towards them.

"...this is impossible! We have been at this for hours! We can't cut it open using any of the swords, we can't burn it open, and nothing in Amethyst's junk made a dent in it! I'm at a loss!" Pearl was wailing loudly.

"We can't give up, Pearl," Garnet kept her cool. "If this is indeed letting off low-level manipulative waves, we need to stop it."

"But is it really even a bad thing?" Amethyst shrugged. "Outside of the fry place, nothing has really even happened."

"Amethyst, my Future Vision is blurred. It is as if I am only able to see what the badge WANTS me to see. That is too much power for one device to hold. It is a danger to the fabric of space and time as a whole!"

"Besides that, look at Greg! He ate one of those Devil Fruit things! He is now unnaturally a part of both this world and their world! The two dimensions have now become intrinsically linked in ways that would not have happened under normal circumstances!" Pearl pointed out. "It is getting out of control! Even dissecting the fruit told us nothing!"

"But what if it was meant to happen?" Amethyst asked. "Who is to say that Steven finding the Rifting Stone wasn't an accident but destiny or something?"

"That is preposterous! Even if that were the case, that would mean that everything that has transpired has done so according to somebody's design!" Pearl grabbed her hair in frustration. "Gah, these philosophical implications are getting us off-track again! We need to summon that terrible man and get this horrible tool out of our world before this 'P.C.M.' destroys us all...whatever that even means!"

"Not right now, you don't!" Steven finally called out, catching the Gems off-guard.

"Whaaa?!" Pearl did a double-take. "Steven?! Connie?! Genevieve?! What are...how did...how long...?!"

"Steven, it is not safe for you three in here!" Garnet told them. "You should not be in the Temple!"

"Neither should you!" Steven stood his ground. "I know that last night shook you up, but you made a promise to the Frymans to help



out with the cleanup! You know that keeping a promise is the most important part of being a Crystal Gem!"

"It is?" Genevieve asked.

"The people of this world believe in you guys, and part of that belief is being able to rely on you!" Steven pleaded his case to his guardians. "Are you going to let them down?"

The Gems regarded each other, not having a proper argument to counter the boy's pleas. Regardless of how sensitive the topic of Uncle Grandpa was, Steven had a point. It was their duty to protect Beach City and Garnet had promised that they would assist the Frymans. Pearl took the Belly Bag Badge and placed it into the waterfall, keeping it safe. "I suppose we are in the wrong here, Steven," Pearl gave a weak smile. "I'm sorry that we lost track of time."

"I too apologize for Pearl losing track of time," Amethyst added as they all left the room, Belly Bag Badge and all.

\*AGITR\*

The presence of the Gems sped up the cleanup tremendously, resulting in the streets being clear of debris and retaining a skeletal structure of the former fry shop. Most of the denizens of Beach City had returned home. This included Priyanka, who had taken the paper and money Steven procured from his room. The last people on the boardwalk were the Frymans, the Gems, the Universes, the Marines, and the pirates. Mr. Fryman was eternally grateful to everyone who helped, but took the time to thank Damian most of all. The bomb man was surprisingly laid-back about it, claiming it was his duty to assist.

"Duty or not, I have never seen a man more dedicated to helping people," Fryman was saying. "Why?"

"I'd tell you, but you wouldn't believe me, man," Damian chuckled.

"Why not?"

"It's a long story..." he sighed. "Oh well. Look, I'm not an expert

carpenter or a contractor, so I advise you to start looking into that. I promise you that I'll help you see this through though."

"Hey, if you don't want to tell me, who am I to pry? All I know is that you will never have to pay to eat at my shop when this is all done. I owe it to you," Mr. Fryman shook his hand.

"I'll hold you to that, buddy."

"Come on, sons. Let's head home. You boys have earned some rest," Fryman motioned to Peedee and Ronaldo, the latter of which he patted on the back. "You put in some good work today, son. I'm proud of you."

"Daaaad! Not in front of the pirates!" Ronaldo whined as they left.

"Well, now what?" Luffy asked as they all walked back to the beach house. "We've beaten Peridot, we helped with the cleanup, and even stopped some Gem monsters. Is it time to search for that Malachite fusion thing?"

"I have something else in mind..." Pearl smiled playfully. "I think that now is as good a time as any to test out Greg's abilities."

"What? Oh man, that's a lot of pressure on me..." Greg gulped. "I was kind of hoping for a relaxing night. I need to start the car wash back up again tomorrow and..."

"No excuses, Greg!" Pearl said in a singsong tone. "Now Amethyst, did you talk to Sour Cream about his brother?"

"Yeah, he told me that Vidalia will probably bring Onion over after their dinner, so who knows when that will be..."

"If you guys are going to watch Greg's training, I don't mind staying behind and waiting for them," Damian offered. "I had to have a private talk with Mayor Dewey anyway."

"Really? The mayor?" Petrea asked. "What for? Does it have to do with your sudden attitude change in the past day?"

Damian adjusted his sunglasses and bit his lip. "...I...I'll tell you

later..."

"You had better, buster!" Petrea stamped her foot down angrily.  
"Some of us happen to be concerned about you!"

"Well that is a kind and generous offer, Damian! Greg, I think we can test your abilities and even schedule in some sword training as well for Connie! It's been so hectic that I haven't given you the proper attention that you deserve," Pearl continued, breaking up the looming tension between Petrea and Damian.

"Really? But I didn't bring the sword..." Connie started.

"You don't need Rose's sword to train! I think some sense of normalcy is just what we need in our lives!" Pearl nodded frantically.  
"Yes! Yes it is!"

"I think Pearl is starting to crack under the pressure," Usopp joked, eliciting some laughs from Luffy and Chopper. The sniper looked to Damian, who would typically chuckle at this type of humor. It seemed like the man was lost in thought about his upcoming meeting.

Usopp was about to comment on it but Pearl beat him to the punch.  
"My gem is NOT cracked and I am insulted you would even insinuate that! Why..."

"Pearl, calm down," Garnet ordered. "Getting worked up over the Belly Bag Badge situation is not helping."

"I can't help it! I feel like I am not in control of anything anymore!"

"See! I'm not the only one!" Nami acknowledged the Gem.

"You idiots are so unorganized," Smoker frowned, finally truly acknowledging them after keeping himself busy with work all day.  
"From what you explained, all you need is to summon this 'Uncle Grandpa' of yours. We established that back when we first landed in Beach City, but I don't think I have seen anyone attempt to TRY to contact him. That could give us some much-needed answers and get us back to the Grand Line to boot."

"You don't think we haven't tried? That is what we have been doing all night!" Pearl shot back at the Marine.

"Are you telling me you had either Universe, Maheswaran, or the painter feign having a problem all night?" Smoker asked sternly. "I don't seem to recall that, but I DO recall the stipulation for having him appear was a child having an issue for him to solve. What issues have any of the children here had to deal with?"

"What about Ronaldo and Peedee?" Steven asked sheepishly. "Their shop burned down. That was a big issue."

"As true as that may be, the issue was solved relatively easily thanks to the timely effort of the Gems and that one's quick thinking," the Marine captain pointed to the distant Damian. "I'm betting that there needs to be an issue that can't just be solved by another person."

"I think I follow..." Robin nodded. "It needs to be a problem that is emotionally hurting them...like, say if either of the Frymans could not cope with the loss of the building..."

"Exactly."

"I have an idea!" Connie chimed in. "It's a long shot, but it might work!"

"The floor is yours, kid."

Connie took a deep breath and looked to Zoro and Tashigi. "You two started taking lessons with Pearl too, right?"

"...I mean, we have had one day's worth of practices..." Tashigi admitted. "Why?"

"I think I know what I want to do with my lesson, Pearl...I want to duel Zoro and Tashigi, but it has to be all-out. If I win, then I'll prove I am a master swordsman. If I lose, I will need to force myself to be better..."

"...which could be an issue Uncle Grandpa might be able to help you with!" Pearl put the pieces together aloud. "I don't know if it would

work...but it is our best chance right now...do either of you have any objections?"

Zoro looked to Tashigi, both looking somewhat uncomfortable at the idea. However, Tashigi took a deep breath and shook her head.

"None from me."

"Me neither, I suppose," Zoro agreed.

"Yes! Sword fighting!" Luffy cheered eagerly. "This is going to be awesome!"

"...does this mean we AREN'T going to test out my abilities?" Greg asked as everybody but Damian piled up on the Warp Pad.

"Hey, we can do both at the same time!" Amethyst snapped her fingers, getting an idea.

"Really? How?"

"You can make the intense background music for the sword fight! You know, set the mood like in the movies!" the purple Gem laughed as they began to warp away.

"...I don't know whether that was a joke or a fantastic idea..."

## The Duel And The Dream

The Straw Hat pirates gasped as they witnessed the sight of the Ancient Sky Arena. It was unlike anything they had ever seen before and, presumably, unlike anything they would ever encounter again.

"Are...are we floating in the air now?!" Nami peered over the edge after stepping off of the Warp Pad. "How is this even possible?!"

"Is it magic?" Chopper asked.

"Yep," Garnet nodded.

"That is amazing! I love magic!" Chopper clapped excitedly.

"As impressive a sight as this is, I can't say that it is practical," Smoker noted, looking around. "Why was this built? Why is it flying in the first place?"

"Dude, did they stamp out all of your creativity in the Marines?" Amethyst laughed. "Lighten up!"

"Yeah, Smokey! Can't you imagine something like this in the Grand Line?" Luffy laughed. "A flying island would be fun!"

"...you DO remember I'm going to arrest you when we get back to the Grand Line, don't you?" Smoker grumbled.

"Haven't we become friends while you have been here?" Luffy asked innocently.

The Marine opened his mouth as if to respond but then closed it and shook his head, muttering words that no doubt were insults at Luffy's intelligence.

"I grabbed a picture of this for you, Genevieve! We can print them out when we get back...oh wait. Steven's computer is broken...well, we will do it later!" Connie called to the painter, putting her cell phone away and taking a set of clothing that Pearl materialized. She started to walk to a nearby pillar. "Um...nobody come over here,

okay?"

"Why?" Luffy asked absentmindedly, resulting in a hit in the head from Nami.

"She's clearly getting changed into a leotard of some kind! She's not going to fight in a dress!"

"Actually," Pearl corrected. "That would be a Kalaripayattu uniform, if we are being precise. It is the traditional garments of an ancient Kerala fighting style the natives developed after watching and, in some cases, assisting us Gems fight other Corrupted Gems."

"Oh," Nami nodded. "I did not know that."

"Well, knowing is half the battle!" Greg chimed in, raising his eyebrows up and down. "Eh? Eh? Nothing?"

"Greg," Pearl sighed. "There is a lot more to battle than just knowledge. There is preparation and skill and..."

"It was a joke, Pearl! A joke!" Greg hung his head in shame, prompting a depressing musical sound to appear unprompted out of nowhere. "Ugh, my humor is never appreciated."

The sound caused Pearl to jump back, slightly alarmed. "Did...did you mean for that to happen, Greg?"

The balding musician raised an eyebrow in confusion. "Did I mean for what to happen?"

"Fascinating...your ability reacts to your emotions as well as your commands..." Robin deduced.

"My thoughts exactly, Robin! I...what is so funny Steven?" the Gem acknowledged the boy, who was now laughing.

"Nothing! Don't mind me!" Steven laughed. He regained his composure and took a seat. "So, what is going to happen exactly? How is Connie going to fight two people at once?"

"That's a good question," Tashigi nodded, looking down at her own

sword and standing in the center of the arena. "There needs to be ground rules for something like this. We don't want SOME PEOPLE to get overzealous..."

"Oy!" Zoro growled.

"There will be none of that!" Pearl wagged her finger at them. "However, I am in agreement with you that there needs to be boundaries, especially for Connie's sake."

"I can handle myself just fine!" Connie called from the other side of the pillar. "This won't work unless I know that I am giving it my best against two opponents who aren't holding back!"

"...I really do not follow this at all," Usopp scratched his head. "All of these rules seem super complicated and convoluted. Are you sure you guys know what you are talking about?"

"Nope!" Amethyst admitted. "Not at all!"

"...that's a relief..." Usopp said sarcastically.

"You know what? Who cares?" Sanji stretched himself out and relaxed in the seats. "I'm about to see moss-head get his ass kicked by a little girl. That's entertainment you can't buy!"

"You really think Connie can beat Zoro?" Chopper asked curiously.

"Without a doubt."

"I'm ready!" the voice of Connie called out as the girl stepped into the arena. She had put her hair into a quick braid and was dressed in a black outfit with slightly baggy pants and a sleeveless top held together by a red sash. Steven's eyes widened as he saw her confidently strut out to meet Zoro, Tashigi, and Pearl.

"Nice outfit," Zoro remarked.

"Nice bandana," Connie said in response to Zoro's traditional head attire during battle.

"Now, now, you two," Pearl chuckled nervously. "Focus on the



matter at hand. Are you sure this is what you wish to do, Connie?"

"I need to do this...for all of them and for Steven," Connie nodded. "If this can get them home, then it will all be worth it."

The Gem smiled and summoned a vertical, two edged sword with a guarded hilt. "Then I present you with your khanda. Do you accept this blade?"

"I do."

"And do you two accept the challenge set before you by this warrior; to work together in a duel such as this?" Pearl asked the two swordsmen from the Grand Line.

"We do," Zoro and Tashigi said at the same time, giving each other a dirty look.

"Then allow me to state the terms and boundaries of this match: no opponent shall attempt a killing strike during combat unless..."

"Woah! Hold it!" Greg interjected. "What does that mean?! 'Killing strike?!' You can't say stuff like that! She's twelve! Her mother would kill me if..."

"Mr. Universe, it is only a formality," Tashigi assured him sternly. "I would never think of actually hurting Connie."

"...okay...just checking..." Greg sat back down and fiddled with his thumbs.

"Ahem," Pearl regained control of the conversation. "As I was saying, the combatants should not attempt a killing strike in combat unless you are prepared to stop your blade a requisite seven inches from your opponent. Physical engagement is allowed, however it should be kept at a minimum. If at any point an opponent yields, the match ceases and a victor shall be named. Finally, all combatants must give their best efforts in the arena as per the predetermined conditions of the duel. Are there any objections to these terms?"

"None at all, ma'am," Connie bowed.

"None whatsoever," Tashigi did the same.

"Nope," Zoro put his sword in his mouth and cracked his neck. "I think we are ready here."

"This is really intense," Petrea commented. "I...are you okay, Steven?"

The boy in question was staring intently at the ring. His eyes were wide and sweat adorned his brow. Finally, he was slightly rocking back and forth. After a moment he stopped and looked back to the former Miss Valentine. "Hmm? What was that?"

"You look...well, freaked out. Is this bothering you?" Petrea asked gently.

"A little," he admitted. "I just don't want Connie to be hurt. If she's out fighting, I want to be with her and not on the sidelines."

"I think Pearl will have this under control. She'll watch over them like a hawk," Petrea smiled reassuringly. "Heck, she even looks a bit like a bird."

"Ha," Genevieve laughed in a flat tone. "Bird Gem. That's funny. I'm going to sketch that..."

The girl pulled out a small pad of paper and a pencil and began to draw incredibly fast. "Hey, where did you get that?" Steven asked.

"Vidalia gave it to me. It's no canvas, but it's good to jot down ideas...and other things," the painter showed her notepad to Steven, who saw that the entire page was filled with cute, cartoonish drawings. The sight made Steven chuckle.

"Ladies, gentlemen, Gems, and reindeer; may I please have your attention?" Pearl announced theatrically. "I would like to extend a warm welcome one and all to you on this nice, summer day. You are about to witness the ultimate display of skills between our own Connie Maheswaran and the unlikely, but formidable, pair of Roronoa Zoro and Master Chief Petty Officer Tashigi!"

Greg, figuring that it would be interesting to take Amethyst's

suggestion literally, decided to use his new gifts to add some ambiance. As the three took their places around Pearl, Greg pantomimed playing a bass drum dramatically, playing up the tension of the moment.

"Dad!" Steven admonished him.

"What? This is the only thing keeping me calm now!"

The three combatants locked eyes with each other as they waited for Pearl's signal. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, Pearl raised her hand in the air. "Combatants all set? Ready? Go!"

Connie was the first to move; running right at Tashigi, who slashed her sword down toward her. The young girl deflected the blade as she crouched and rolled away from her, swiping at the Marine's feet. Tashigi, not expecting this, jumped in the air to evade the maneuver.

What she was not counting on was for Connie to expect this and to change the trajectory of the blade mid-swipe, using the flat edge to hit the shins of her knees. This sudden strike knocked the bespectacled Marine to the floor.

"Gotcha," Connie smirked as she jumped up herself to land the finishing blow to Tashigi, but her strike was blocked by Zoro, whose power forced Connie back several inches.

Zoro placed his three swords in his mouth and rushed at her. "**Oni...**" he began before stopping himself. "Wait...damn it! It is hard not to yell my attacks out!"

His swords slashed at Connie, but with only a fraction of the strength that he would typically use in the attack. If he used his full power, the girl was bound to lose a lot of blood. It didn't matter to him, however, as he expected the technique to force the girl to yield.

Imagine his surprise when Connie deflected the strike with a spinning attack, exposing his side.

"What?!"

The girl hit him with her blade, actually drawing a small amount of

blood in the process. The move shocked the swordsman as it was not what he was expecting at all. The girl was completely lost in the fight, ignoring everything else around her. Gone was the cheerful playmate of Steven; present was a duelist of the highest level.

At least, that is what she was telling herself.

Zoro had seen this kind of energy in himself as a youth. She was putting everything into the fight and was letting it consume her. She had become one with her sword, but this was not the best thing at the moment. Connie had requested for her opponents to give it their all in order to gauge her own strength. If she failed, it would give her something to work towards...if she viewed it like that.

She had gone into this fight linking losing as a problem for that Uncle Grandpa person to solve. Problems aren't something to work toward in one's eye; problems are something to eliminate.

"Shit; she's not going to stop!"

As the fight continued for nearly fifteen minutes, Steven watched in horror as Connie continued to press her vicious attacks at Tashigi and Zoro, allowing herself to be cut every now and then in order to get a small strike in. "What is Connie doing?!"

"She is holding her own against two master swordsmen. That is awesome!" Luffy cheered. "Go Connie!"

"But she's getting hurt!"

"Gah!" Greg looked away, burying his face in his hands. "I can't watch this!"

Amethyst laughed at him. "Don't be a baby, Greg! Connie is doing great out there. Why are you pouting?"

"I'm worried for her! She's just a girl!"

"She seems fine to me..."

"I'm worried too..." Smoker frowned, examining the match. "Even Pearl is noticing that this is not right...that girl is pushing herself too

hard."

"You're just saying that because Tashigi is getting her butt whooped!" Usopp pointed out.

The Marine growled angrily and pointed to Connie. "Tashigi was not fighting to the best of her ability, but she looks like she is about to."

"You can tell that?" Chopper asked, fear in his eyes. "What does that say about Connie?"

"Look at her! She is deliberately allowing herself to get wounded! If she keeps this up, she is going to suffer a serious injury. Tashigi and your damn swordsman can only hold back so much before being forced in a corner! This needs to end! Now!"

"He's right," Garnet got up, alarmed. "I'll stop this..."

"No!" Luffy got in her way. "It can't end like that! It would mean that this was for nothing! You will hurt her honor!"

"Pirate Captain Luffy, step out of my way. Now."

The Straw Hat pirate looked directly at her and would not budge. "I trust Zoro to do the right thing. Trust me. If it continues, you do what you have to."

The Gem stared at the pirate and then back to the continuing duel. "Fine. But when I give the word, this ends. Period." Then she looked down to Pearl, who was looking uneasily at the sight, but clearly in awe of their abilities. Regardless, it seemed like she was about to step in as well. "Pearl! Do not end the fight! Give it a little longer!"

Pearl opened her mouth to argue, but was distracted by Connie getting a small cut in the arm while attempting to break Zoro's center line.

"Connie! What are you doing?! Forfeit!" Pearl yelled to her. "There is no shame in admitting defeat!"

In the heat of battle, Connie was an untamed lion, ignoring Pearl's pleas. She continued to assault her opponents with such ferocity

and speed that Tashigi and Zoro were forced to do exactly what they had been asked of. Neither of them wanted to match the strength of her blade, but were given no other choice. They had managed to only inflict minor cuts on the girl, but they were not enough to deter her.

Connie was now focusing all of her abilities on attacking Tashigi, letting Zoro be as he collected himself. The swordsman looked at his opponent and realized exactly what needed to be done. He gripped his sword and rushed at her as she was in the middle of an elaborate ducking move. He could see exactly what she was about to do: roll under Tashigi and strike from behind.

The second she picked herself from the ground, Zoro knocked her out with a soft tap to the back of her head.

"Zoro!" Tashigi yelled. "What did you just do?!"

"I won."

\*AGITR\*

The Warp Pad in the beach house glowed once more as the group returned from the match. Pearl was holding the bandaged Connie in her arms, cradling her tightly. Steven, for his part, was right by her side.

"I don't know why you didn't forfeit earlier!" Pearl was saying, clearly a snippet of a much longer lecture. "Regardless of your own proficiency, you pushed yourself too far and..."

"Is this necessary?" Connie asked, a bit irritated, rubbing the back of her head. "I only got a few cuts. This is exactly what we wanted!"

"No, it wasn't!" Steven exclaimed. "I never want to see you hurt where I can't protect you!"

"This is serious, Connie! A few cuts on a human can lead to other issues!" Pearl warned her. "I might not know everything there is to know about human physiology, but I know how to handle wounds like this. We have a medical kit just for situations like this...but I'm afraid..."

"'Afraid' what?" a female voice called from the living room.

The group walked into the greater part of the living quarters and was greeted to the surprising sight of Damian sharing tea with Priyanka, who had now rushed up to check on her daughter. They were so surprised that they failed to see several wrapped boxes and bags along the wall. "Connie! What happened?! You are bleeding...are those SWORD wounds?!"

The doctor stretched out Connie's arm and looked over the several minor cuts on her arms and legs. "They are not too deep...but that is like saying that someone wasn't too poisoned! How did this happen?!"

"Mom, calm down! I am okay!" Connie begged. "My pride is hurt more than anything."

"Your pride? What about my heart?! Is this how your fencing lessons with Pearl typically end?! How many times do you get wounded in a typical lesson?!"

"I can assure you, Dr. Maheswaran, that this was an isolated incident...and one that shall not happen again!" Pearl looked down at her pupil with regret.

"It most certainly will not!" Priyanka agreed. "Pearl, you always seemed like the sensible one! When Connie explained just what it is she does here, I took a small comfort in knowing that you were the one supervising it. How could you let this happen to my daughter on your watch?! When I heard that you were training Connie, I thought that you would have taken every conceivable measure to ensure her safety!"

"You can't blame Pearl, mom," Connie argued. "She tried to stop the fight, but I kept pushing it. If I didn't, it wouldn't be genuine!"

"So, now it was a fight?!"

"Connie, it wouldn't matter if it was genuine or not! You put yourself at risk to be truly injured, which would have accomplished a hollow victory at best! What you did out there was reckless and, honestly, I

expected more from you!" Pearl shook her head in disappointment.

"What do you mean by 'a hollow victory?'" Priyanka asked wearily.

"We are trying to summon a reality warping mustachioed man wearing a propeller cap and a talking fanny pack," Garnet explained.

"...WHAT ARE YOU EVEN TALKING ABOUT?!" Priyanka freaked out. "I don't think you are taking this seriously!"

"I'm always serious."

"Priyanka, it's true," Greg elaborated. "Getting in contact with this guy is the only way to get The Little Rascals here back to their home. However, the only way he comes to town is if a kid needs his help..."

"And that kid just HAPPENED to be my daughter?!" Priyanka shouted. "Are you even listening to what you all are saying?! This is insanity, Greg!"

"If it's any consolation, we are just as lost as you are," Usopp chimed in weakly before noticing the death glare he was receiving from Nami.

"Hey! I'm on your side, Priyanka! Somehow, it went from trying to figure out what powers I have to Connie's sword match of the century!" Greg shook his head and sighed. He stared at Connie and bit his lip. It was clear that he hated being the lowest authority figure on the totem pole. "It got out of control way too fast and, frankly, it should have been more thought-out."

"You know what is insane? The fact that nobody is yelling at green hair over there for being the one to knock her out," Amethyst pointed to Zoro, who was scowling and gripping his sheathed swords tightly. "I would have bet anything that..."

"Amethyst, you know nothing of the art of swordplay," Pearl shook her head, trying to keep calm in a tense room. "What Zoro did was the best possible solution. By stopping her when he did, it stopped her from making further reckless mistakes. Connie, you pushed yourself too far and lost sight of your opponents. No matter what you



are fighting for, you can't lose sight of your own limitations as a human."

"Limitations?!" Connie blurted out, shocking even her mother, who was unaccustomed to such behavior. "What would happen if I was fighting Homeworld Gems with Steven? How can I know my own limitations when my life is on the line?"

Steven looked mortified. "Don't talk like that, Connie!"

"Why is that even on your mind?!" Priyanka asked, horrified. "You are only twelve!"

"And I am now a part of something bigger, mom! I have a responsibility to better myself to the peak of my abilities! I knew I would probably lose to such experienced swordsmen like Zoro and Tashigi, but all this showed me was that I am not as prepared to stand by Steven's side as I thought," Connie started to cry. "This was all supposed to give me a problem to let Uncle Grandpa fix, but it just highlighted my own shortcomings!"

"Connie..." Steven started to say before a rough hand was put on his shoulder.

"That's enough," Zoro spoke up. He walked over to the crying girl and knelt down to her level. "Connie, what you did was foolish, but admirable. You never gave up and you fought with a purpose. Most kids your age would not be able to do what you just did. How long have you been training with Pearl?"

"What?" Connie sniffled. "I...only a few months..."

"I can't speak for Miss Marine over there, but I have been training for years. You kept up with two experienced swordsmen for an extended duel. I've taken down adults in faster time than it took to stop you. That is impressive," Zoro kept eye contact with her. "There is a fire in you, Connie, but you have to keep it in check before it burns you down. Be proud and keep training. One day, I want a rematch with you, one-on-one, and I promise you that I will not hold back."

"You...you mean it?" Connie asked.

"Only if you are as serious about training as you are about everything else," he cracked a faint smile.

Getting up, Zoro bowed to Priyanka, who stepped back. "Doctor Ma...Me...Connie's mom," Zoro started out, sighing as he couldn't pronounce their last name. "I apologize for the level of intensity that we brought to your daughter's training, but you need to know that she is good. She needs to keep honing in her skills so she could truly become a powerhouse with a sword. You should be proud."

Priyanka was silent for a moment before raising an eyebrow. "You...don't strike me as the kind of person who likes to apologize."

"I'm not," Zoro admitted. "But your kid has earned my respect. If that's what I need to do, then so be it."

"So be it, indeed," Priyanka extended her hand out to shake his, which he accepted. The doctor took a deep breath and reviewed the situation internally. "So, my daughter is a natural despite being bruised every which way?"

"Something like that."

"Dr. Maheswaran, I..." Pearl started to stammer before getting silenced by the doctor herself.

"Pearl," she closed her eyes and paused, finding the exact words she wanted to use. "It sounds like Connie is advancing rather well in your sessions?"

The Gem was lost for words. "I...that is to say...yes...but..."

"Then I believe I would like to view one of your lessons together," Connie's mother stated in a strict tone. "If I am to truly accept what my daughter is doing, then I should see for myself the life she is leading."

Connie just stood there wide-eyed, playing back her mother's comment in her head. "You want to see me train?"

"Why wouldn't a parent want to get involved with their child's interests and activities?" Priyanka smiled briefly before it disappeared. "But I expect you to keep your focus on the here and now and not on hypothetical fights. This...whatever this was...will never happen again. Are we understood?"

"Yes, ma'am!" Connie grinned and hugged her with all of her might.

"Well, I think it could be arranged..." Pearl tapped a finger to the side of her face. "Would you like to invite your husband as well?"

Priyanka and Connie began to laugh. "And see him have a heart attack watching his daughter hold a sword? I think not."

"Priyanka, I'm kind of surprised at how easily you are taking this," Greg commented as she let Connie run over to Steven, who engulfed her in a large hug. "I mean, I'm used to this kind of stuff and this was hard to watch even for me."

"Greg, allow me to put it in perspective: I've almost lost my daughter once by being too overprotective, causing her to continuously lie to me for almost a year. Internally? I'm utterly mortified and furious at the situation. However, I need to think about my daughter's happiness. Quite frankly, she is the happiest I have ever seen her when she is with all of you. If it means being on hand for these kind of situations to get a better understanding of what Connie does, so be it. It can't hurt to have self-defense classes at her age," Priyanka watched her daughter laugh as Steven lectured her about being safe. "Besides, it seems like your son is doing my job for me."

"He does that," Greg smiled before raising his eyebrow. "Wait, what were you doing here anyway? I mean, not that I don't mind your company, but we were expecting Vidalia and..."

"Trying to kick me out of here, Mr. Universe? I'm offended!"

"That's not what I meant and you know it!"

The elder Maheswaran gave a small smile and acknowledged the children. "I was actually dropping off some things your son asked me to pick up for him over at the bookstore. When I came to leave

them, the only person here was Damian, who had just finished a rather interesting talk with Mayor Dewey that he was explaining to me over tea..."

Noticing the bags and boxes that were overlooked, Greg stroked his beard in wonder. "Did he now? Wait, one thing at a time. What did Steven want?"

"Ask him yourself."

"Don't mind if I do. Schtoo-ball, stop being Mr. Mom to Connie and tell your old man just what these things are."

"Hmm? What things?" Steven asked, trying to break away from his friend. Finally his eyes landed on the assorted items and he began to smile. "Oh! I didn't even see them! You had them wrapped for me, Dr. Maheswaran?"

"Presentation is everything, Steven," she explained. "I figured you would appreciate that."

The boy had stars in his eyes. "They are perfect!"

"...but what are they?" Greg asked again.

"Well...I was going to do this later, but there's no better time like the present!" Steven laughed. "Get it?"

"Get what?" Pearl asked, trying to follow along after figuring out the logistics of having Priyanka on hand for training sessions. "I don't get your humor sometimes, Steven."

"I got you guys souvenirs from our dimension!" the half-Gem pointed to the assorted gifts. "Well, not you, but the Straw Hats and Marines! This is a good way to get the positive funky flow going after..." Steven looked to Connie, who made a face reassuring him that she would not do anything that drastic again.

"What?" Nami asked. "Steven, you shouldn't have done that!"

"No really, you shouldn't have," Smoker grumbled, trying not to roll his eyes at yet another example of positivity from this dimension.

"What did you get us?!" Luffy asked eagerly. "Food?!"

"Don't be rude!" Petrea scolded. Then she looked to Damian, who was sipping his tea and watching the events unfold around him. "Did you know about this?"

"Not even a little. I don't make it my business to pry," Damian shrugged. "I've had other things on my mind."

Petrea opened her mouth to make a comment, but was stopped by Steven shoving a box in her face. "This one is for you, Petrea! And this one is yours, Damian!"

"I...thank you, Steven! Um...do we open the boxes now?"

"Sure! Connie, would you help me pass out the rest of these? I think you know what are in them."

"I don't think Connie should be doing too much moving yet, Steven," Priyanka shook her head. "These cuts could easily reopen, which would not be the best thing right now."

"I'll help you, dude!" Amethyst said, shapeshifting into a Connie doppelgänger.

"Gah!" Priyanka jumped. "May I please ask that you NEVER do that again in my presence...or ever for that matter?!"

"...why?"

As Priyanka freaked out on Amethyst, Petrea took the opportunity to look at the thoughtful gift Steven bought for her. She was touched. This might have been the first gift she had received in years. It never ceased to amaze her just how kind and thoughtful that boy was.

"Oh...it's two books!" Petrea smiled, examining the two items in the box. One was a recipe book for chocolate treats and the other was a children's book with an odd looking man on the cover. She was confused until she saw the name. "*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory?*"

"Connie showed it to me when I was grounded from television, but

then I found out it was a movie too...well, two of them!" Steven said as he handed a larger box to Smoker. "I figured that you guys don't have television so you would like a lot of books...and, in some cases, comic books!"

"*Captain Marvel?*" Usopp asked, holding up one of the many comic books he was given. "*Dog Copter?* These are weird names for books..."

"Don't knock Dog Copter and Billy Batson! They are my favorites! I mean, I know Batman is my dad's favorite and all, but you can't go wrong with the power of SHAZAM!" Steven yelled the last word.

"Steven, you put a lot of thought into these!" Nami commented, examining two new cartography books. "These contain fairly comprehensive maps! It's amazing to think of the differences between our two worlds!"

"Some of Steven's instructions were rather...vague," Priyanka admitted. "I took it upon myself to find the best things to work with. I will say that I'm surprised at how much money you saved up, Steven."

"You never know when a rainy day fund might come in handy!"

He looked around and smiled as he saw Zoro looking over a sword manual, Genevieve reading a compilation of fine Renaissance art, Chopper fawning over an advanced medical journal, and Luffy getting excited over a *Star Wars* comic book and a historical book on pirates. Robin had just opened up her giant package, containing the complete works of William Shakespeare, and came over to thank him.

"This was very thoughtful of you, Steven. Thank you," she gave him a small hug. The boy returned it, feeling good about this nice change in attitude from before.

"What the hell is a 'Newton's Cradle?'" Smoker asked, pulling out a box and a small book. "And what the hell is this?"

"A Newton's Cradle is this thing that I've seen people use to relieve

stress. You hit one metal ball and then it causes another metal ball to get hit on the other side!" Steven tried to explain. "It's not as complicated as it sounds. As for the book...I don't know!"

"That is my own special addition to this," Priyanka frowned. "I bought both you and the chef a self-help book on how to quit smoking before it kills you."

"...thanks a lot," Sanji grumbled, setting aside the book to look at his recipes in his new cookbook.

"Oh! That reminds me! I never gave you the book I bought you either!" Connie said. "Steven, I think I left it in your loft last night before the movie."

"I'll go grab it! I have to get Tashigi's gift too anyway!" Steven ran up to his bed.

"You...you bought me a book too?" Smoker asked, clearly surprised that so many people were thinking of him.

"Well, I couldn't stand seeing you mope for two days straight. If you are stuck here, which it looks like you still are, you should at least be doing something besides balancing rocks," the girl smiled.

Smoker stood there and looked from the novelty desk toy to the young girl in front of him. 'These people never stop surprising me. If only Straw Hat didn't corrupt their view on pirates...'

"Here it is! For you, sir!" Steven passed him an incredibly thick book. "And you, madame!"

"*Les Misérables*...that book from the dinner conversation..." Smoker recalled the information. He put the gifts down and put his hand out gently. "...thank you, Maheswaran. Universe."

"Any time!"

"...what is this thing?" a bruised Tashigi asked, looking at a square device. "A 'Game Child?'"

"You stick these little doohickeys inside of it and press this switch.

It's not like *Smash Pals Scuffle*, but these three games mean a lot to me. Play them well when you are not hunting Zoro!"

"Oy!"

The Marine looked at the three games and frowned. "These names are weird. *Soviet Block Revolution? Pokettomon: Red Version? Super Mueo Land 2?*"

"Classics all the same! I also have a bunch of batteries too! They go in the back and allow you to keep playing...I don't know if you have batteries on the Grand Line," Steven shrugged.

"Am I going to be lost if I don't have the first *Mueo Land*?" Tashigi asked, clearly bewildered.

"Nah. That game is kind of...weird, yet charming. Oh! Damian, do you like your shirt?"

The bomb man was examining a Beach City shirt and a tie, causing him to chuckle. "You know it, kid. I guess we are even now, aren't we?"

"Well, I don't want you going back to the Grand Line with the scales unbalanced!" Steven laughed.

"Steven...all of you..." Damian sighed, putting down the shirt. "Damn it, it's now or never. I...I need to tell you guys something."

"Um...okay?" Steven responded, clearly concerned. "Are you alright?"

"I...I talked to Mayor Dewey and he's going to hire me for a job."

"Oh! That's pretty cool," Steven smiled. "That will give you something to do while you are here!"

"That's the thing...I've decided I'm not going back to the Grand Line."

"WHAT?!" everybody, save Priyanka exclaimed at once.

"What the hell does that mean?!" Petrea asked angrily.



"Damian, I don't think that is a good idea," Garnet frowned.

"I don't understand. What does William Dewey and his job offer have to do with you wanting to stay here? It seems rather...much!" Pearl asked.

"Wait...can you even stay here? You don't have a social security card or money or...well anything!" Connie pointed out.

"Don't worry about it," Damian handwaved it. "Mayor Dewey told me he would help me become a citizen abusing some kind of legal loophole or something."

"That raises more questions!"

"Look, the truth is...I felt something in the past twenty four hours that I haven't felt since I was a kid. You all constantly talk about your dreams and hopes for the future and me...well my dream always seemed unobtainable," Damian took off his sunglasses and wiped away at his eyes.

"Your dream?!" Luffy, Steven, and Usopp asked at the same time.

"You numbskulls have been asking about it since I joined up with you and I've been very hesitant to tell you what it is...but here it goes," he took a deep breath. "I want...I want to be a fireman."

There was a moment of silence in the room as everyone processed what he said. Slowly, it dawned on them why Damian's recent behavior was so different than usual. "I don't understand...why is that a bad thing?" Steven asked. "Aren't firemen good people?"

"They are, Steven...but think about it: I ate a bomb Devil Fruit! I cause more destruction than I help to prevent it! That's not even counting..." Damian stopped before grabbing a tissue. "Damn it! I told myself I wouldn't cry..."

Petrea got up and put her hand on his shoulder to comfort him. "Let it out, Damian. There is nothing wrong with crying."

"It's...just so hard. When I was eight, I accidentally burned down my house by playing with matches. My dad was in a burn ward for years

before they finally pulled the plug...and my mom walked out on me when I was five, so I basically became a self-made orphan. I made it my life's goal to make sure that what I did would never be repeated by anyone else...until I ended up with the Bomb Bomb Fruit. Literally the only Devil Fruit that could have been worse was the one your brother ate Luffy," Damian explained through the tears. "After I realized that I'd be causing more fires through explosions, I withdrew into myself. I became jaded and cynical, which is where Crocodile found me."

He gripped Petrea's hand hard and gave her a weak smile. "Despite doing literally the exact opposite of what I told myself to do, the allure of my own utopia just sounded so good. Petrea here helped make the days go by easier; forging an actual friendship through something as evil as Baroque Works. By the time I met you all, I believed everything Crocodile told us about the world...and how I would never accomplish my dream otherwise...until I got knocked off of my boat on my way to Little Garden."

Steven, ever emotionally prone, wiped away a tear of his own as he realized that who he was talking about. "...me?"

"Yeah, kid. You. Your damn optimism combined with Petrea's newfound outlook on life made me feel things again. You believed in me even though I gave you no reason to. If it wasn't for you, who knows what I'd be doing. You are an inspiration, Steven Universe," Damian told him, prompting the boy to rush and hug him tightly.

"You ARE a good person, Damian! You've helped so many people on this journey so far..." Steven started before Damian put a finger to his lips.

"It's true. It really is. But the other day with the fire...it reignited that old passion...no pun intended," Damian cracked a smile. "I want to see the Frymans' repairs through. I want to help them and all of your city. When Mayor Dewey told me you had no actual firemen in the city, I knew I had an opportunity to do some good."

"...do you realize just how stupid you are?" Sanji asked.

Petrea moved faster than anyone and grabbed the chef by the

collar, changing his weight to be light enough to lift off of the ground. "How dare you, Sanji?! Do you realize how rude and insensitive you are?!"

"My Petrea-chan, I could have worded that better," Sanji said with a gulp. "But all I wanted to say was that he has been wrong for years about his power!"

"What the hell are you talking about?!" Damian asked, getting angry.

"You have the ability to cause explosions! There are times where a fireman would need to make a hole in a wall to get to a person faster! You literally have the perfect power to be a fireman, you shitty idiot!" Sanji got out. He then turned to Petrea and sighed. "Your eyes turn the loveliest shade of green when you are angry."

"PIG!" she yelled as she threw him toward the wall, only to be caught by Garnet before he caused any damage.

"Smooth," Garnet told him.

"I..." Damian stood there, lost in a sea of emotions. "I...holy...how did I not realize that at all these past ten years?!"

"Self-loathing?" Usopp suggested.

"Stupidity?" Luffy wagered a guess.

"Not helping!" Nami hit them on the head. She rubbed her knuckles and patted Damian, who had started to laugh madly to himself. "I for one think that you will make a great fireman, Damian. You will really help a lot of people here."

"Excuse me, but we aren't done here!" Petrea stamped her foot down. "Why would you make such a rash decision like that without talking to any of us?"

The former Mr. 5 gulped. "I don't expect you to understand, Petrea...I just have this chance to do some good. Sailing around with you and the Straw Hats has been some of the greatest experiences in my life...and I will cherish them until I die. But I need to do this...for me."

"But we will miss you!" Luffy started to cry. "I don't care if Operation: Discover Damian's Dream is completed! I can't stand to see one of my nakama go! It will be bad enough to lose Steven and the Gems...but to lose you too..."

"Actually," Petrea sighed. "You might want to add another name to that list."

"What?!"

"Damian, you've been my partner for years now. We've gone through hell and back. If you think I'm going to let you do this alone, you are dead wrong," Petrea began to chuckle lightly. "Kyahahahaha! I've lost my mind, but what the hell?"

"But...but...at least he has the prospects of a job!" Pearl freaked out. "What will you do to survive here?!"

"Sell chocolate of course! Every beach town needs a good chocolate shop! It might be a rough couple of years, but I already have all of my tools on the Merry. That's half of the battle right there!" She smacked her head. "God, I sound crazy right now!"

"You...you would really leave our world behind...just for me?" Damian asked. "Why?"

"Because you can't break up the 'Mr. 5 Pair!' You're my best and oldest friend, Damian. Of course I would," Petrea blushed. "Besides, I could make a killing here with the shore crowd."

"I've got a great idea: why don't you all just stay?" Smoker asked. "My life would be much happier and then I wouldn't have to arrest you."

"Fat chance, Smokey! How would I become the Pirate King if I stayed here?" Luffy asked, pulling down his eyelid.

"...I tried," the Marine sighed. "I should have known it wouldn't be that easy."

"Oh my gosh! When everybody gets home, you two can stay here with me until you guys can get started!" Steven smiled. "We can be

roommates!"

"Steven...I don't think you sharing the house with a grown couple is such a good idea..." Priyanka frowned. "As I was telling Damian before, Doug and I can look into some low income housing."

"We aren't a couple!" Petrea and Damian said at the same time.

"But...do they have NO income housing?" Steven asked.

"Hey, I've got an idea: why don't you two just stay in the van with me? We can pow-wow for a while and make it work," Greg suggested.

"...I think not..." Petrea shook her head.

"Fine. You can stay with Steven and the big guy can stay with me! Problem solved!" Greg smiled.

"I still think that this is a terrible idea...no offense," Pearl objected. "You two have a minimal means of human income, no long-term plan, and no source of 'insurance!' How..."

"We will make it work for Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum here," Greg patted Damian's back. "Not every situation is perfect, but hey. If every pork chop were perfect..."

"We wouldn't have hot dogs!" Steven yelled excitedly. "Dad; you're the best!"

"Well...I try..." Greg blushed. "But there is still a heck of a lot we have to talk to Mayor Dewey about...but it is best not to think about that now. We will deal with that whenever the rest of you end up home..."

"Wait...what about you, Genevieve?" Nami asked. "Are you staying here too?"

The painter had been silent the entire time, engaged in her book and ignoring everything around her. "I'm sorry...what have you guys been talking about?"

"...are you joking?"

"Nope. I...say, you forgot one," Genevieve pointed to the door.

"What are you talking about? Everybody received a..." Priyanka shook her head until she followed Genevieve's line of sight. "Where did that come from?"

Sure enough, there was a single package left. Amethyst, not thinking at all, walked over to it and picked it up. "Hey! It's for Connie!"

The young girl jumped. "What? Me?"

"Yeah!"

"Don't open it!" Priyanka ordered. "I most certainly did not bring that!"

"I don't see what the big deal is," Amethyst shrugged. "It's just a box."

The Gem opened it up, causing everyone to adopt a battle stance, with Steven forming a bubble around Connie, Priyanka, and Greg. However, nothing happened. Amethyst reached inside and pulled out a small piece of paper.

"What does it say, Amethyst?" Luffy asked.

"It's hard to make out...um...I think it is in some kind of code..." the purple Gem shrugged.

"Allow me," Robin offered. She moved past Tashigi, who avoided eye contact with her, and looked over the sheet. "Hmm...it is a cipher...give me a moment...ah. I think I have it..."

"...well?"

"It says 'Good Morning,'" Robin nodded while staring at the paper.

"'Good Morning?!'" the Gems said at the same time.

"Why are you so nervous?! What does 'Good Morning' mean?" Priyanka asked in a concerned voice.

"That's a good morning!" a voice from behind her told her. It belonged to a strange-looking man with a propeller cap and a fanny pack pointing to the window, where the sun shone brightly in the sky. "Or is it afternoon? I always get these things mixed up!"

"I...who are you?!" she asked, clearly flustered by the stranger's sudden appearance.

"Me? I'm your Uncle Grandpa!"

# The Return To The Status Quo

"So...your NAME is Uncle Grandpa...yet you claim to BE every person in the world's uncle and grandfather?" Priyanka sat down and stared at the newest person in Steven's house. "Am I just missing something here?"

The sight of Uncle Grandpa had caused a great surprise in Steven's living room. Though they had hoped that the duel between Zoro, Tashigi, and Connie would yield this exact result, it seemed that nobody expected it to truly happen. It was a surreal experience for the visitors from the Grand Line, but at least they had come from a world where Devil Fruit existed. As for poor Priyanka...

She was utterly lost.

"...you don't look like my grandpa..." Luffy looked the stranger over. "Then again, I don't know if I have an uncle...so it seems legit..."

"You know, a part of me didn't believe you guys when you explained this to me," Usopp blinked. "In fact, I still don't believe it. How is this even possible?"

"Seems simple enough to me," Genevieve shrugged. "You're just the personification of some kind of abstract desire to help the youth of this 'Multiverse' thing, right?"

"I'm what now?" Uncle Grandpa scratched his head in confusion.

"Who cares about what he is? The only thing I care about is if he has the ability to send us back to the Grand Line," Smoker cut in.

"Woah! Hold on, folks! I'm a bit lost on everything right about now," Uncle Grandpa pleaded. "You want to go to a finish line?"

With that, a finish line appeared in the middle of the room much to the bewilderment of everyone, save Steven, who laughed. "So, if this is the finish line, where should we begin the race?" Uncle Grandpa asked, stretching his legs out.



"AWESOME!" Luffy and Chopper cried out in awe.

Priyanka stared at the sight and ran her hands through her long hair. "That shouldn't be possible...I did not just witness that..."

"Not a finish line! I said the Grand Line!" Smoker yelled.

"Pork rinds? I don't think you should eat that before a race," the man shook his head. "It's not really healthy."

"Are you doing this on purpose?!" The Marine grabbed Uncle Grandpa by his rainbow shoulder straps. "This isn't a joke!"

"What's a joke?"

"Gah!" Smoker let him go and threw his hands up. "I don't have the patience for this!"

"Captain Smoker, I think you better let us handle this. We have...ugh, experience with this," Pearl suggested. The Gem took a deep breath and prepared for the worst. "Um...Uncle Grandpa...welcome back to Beach City..."

"Oh! Good Morning, Pearl! It's great to be back! I just flew in and boy, are my arms tired!"

"Yes, yes; that is very amusing," Pearl ignored the comment. "I am not going to lie, we have had a lot of setbacks and we were hoping you would be able to answer a few questions for us..."

"Oh no! You guys couldn't find Steven?!" Uncle Grandpa looked alarmed. "That's terrible!"

"I'm right here, Uncle Grandpa! Good Morning...err...Afternoon!" Steven moved into view, waving happily.

The sight of Steven caused the man to clap excitedly. "Oh goodie! You made it home safe! That's a relief. Still, if you are back here, then what setbacks are you talking about...and how come you guys didn't come back to the U.G.R.V. before...and why does it feel like I just interrupted a very serious moment?"

"That's our little problem..." Pearl began. "You see, just as we were about to transport ourselves back to your van thing using your little badge pin, we accidentally started something called 'P.C.M.' that caused us to return here. We couldn't get a hold of you until Connie decided to duel Zoro and Tashigi..."

"Hello again, Uncle Grandpa," Connie waved.

"...you've MET this man before?!" Priyanka asked exasperatedly.

"Good Morning, Connie! So, we reused that bit already? Hmm...and you said you activated P.C.M.?" Uncle Grandpa tapped his finger to his chin. "Tell me, have a lot of seemingly convenient things been happening just because it seems like it SHOULD happen?"

"Yes...that is one way of looking at it I suppose..." Pearl frowned.

"Whelp; that sounds like P.C.M. to me!" Uncle Grandpa snapped his fingers. "I'm glad we figured that out! Now Connie, do you want to tell me more about your fight..."

"Actually," Connie hesitated, seeing the impatience etched on Pearl's face. "I was hoping you could explain what 'P.C.M.' was...please?"

"Yes! That would be most helpful!" Pearl agreed.

"Why?" Uncle Grandpa asked.

"...why not?" Connie countered.

"Well-reasoned!" Uncle Grandpa bowed. "In my experience, the greatest asset of all is love. However, the SECOND greatest asset of all is luck! Thankfully, I know a thing or two about that kind of stuff! The Belly Bag Badge has a way of making sure things happen the way you want them to happen...but it can't be overdone. Do you see?"

"Not at all!" everybody yelled at the same time.

"Uncle Grandpa, I think you need a different approach," the talking fanny pack chimed in.

"The clothing just talked! Why is the clothing talking?!" Priyanka began to freak out before taking a big breath. "You know what? I don't want to know. If I am going to accept this life for my daughter, I don't want to know."

"Good idea," Genevieve patted her on the back.

"Poor mom..." Connie sighed.

"Well, why don't you explain it, Belly Bag?" Uncle Grandpa motioned for his fanny pack to speak. "The floor is yours!"

He bent down and ripped up a piece of flooring, promoting Greg to grab it out of his hands and push it back into the ground. "Not the flooring! I hate installing flooring!"

"While you do that, I'm gonna get caught up on what exactly happened here," Uncle Grandpa said, pulling out a smartphone. "Hmm...oh here we go! *A Gem in the Rough!* Seems like a good read!"

"...this is making me want a smoke so badly," Sanji rubbed his temples, ignoring a dirty look from Priyanka.

"Thank you, Uncle G! To explain rather briefly, the Belly Bag Badge has a setting that allows its wielders to get to things in a much faster, convenient fashion. It does so by subtly altering the world around it to make a new, unique path to its destination," Belly Bag explained.

"I'd like to know why you would withhold information about the badge that could have gotten us to Steven faster than we managed to," Garnet folded her arms, clearly annoyed.

"Simple really, Lady Garnet," Belly Bag replied. "Reality itself is very delicate and fragile. Very few people can traverse it and come back sane. You Gems managed to do so the first time you met Uncle Grandpa and since they were with you, Connie and Steven's dad did as well on your second trip! Unless you are a being of pure imagination and magic like Uncle Grandpa, one could fracture reality beyond repair if they overuse the badge! As we had no way of

knowing WHERE Steven was, the badge could have gone through two stops in the Multiverse or it could have been fifty-two! The risk was too great...right, Uncle Grandpa?"

"Hehehe! I like the part with the giant catfish!" Uncle Grandpa laughed to himself, disregarding everything around him.

"...is...is he reading a transcript of everything that has transpired on this adventure?" Greg asked, clearly bewildered.

"I'm still wrapping my brain around the fact we are having a conversation with a fanny pack," Damian shook his head.

"I think I follow so far," Garnet nodded, returning to the matter at hand. "We probably would have abused the badge given the emotional state we were in. It was wise not to tell us about it."

"That may be true, but there is another downside to P.C.M. You see, prolonged exposure to P.C.M. could make you dependent upon it to make any small choice! Thankfully, it hasn't been used that long here. If you had continued to be exposed to it, you would have questioned your freedom to act autonomously as a whole!"

All eyes turned to Nami, who blushed and stood there wide-eyed. "Oh my god. That explains my existential crisis."

"So the Belly Bag Badge is like the One Ring mixed with a Boom Tube, a Warp Pad, and Felix Felicis?" Connie asked, trying to piece everything together. "That's a lot to take in."

"Seems simple to me!" Luffy smiled before it turned into a frown. "But I don't know what any of those things you just mentioned are..."

"You're an idiot," Zoro sighed. "So, what now? Did you manage to get here because of the sword fight or what?"

"Ah! I see what happened!" Uncle Grandpa said, throwing his phone out the window and into the sand near the ship just as he was about to answer. "The Belly Bag Badge wasn't designed to bring through something as large as your ship! Combined with the P.C.M., it would have remained broken if not for you, Pearl!"

"...me?" the Gem asked.

"If I read this right, Pearl put the badge in some kind of waterfall when she was told to help clean up a few chapters back! The magic of the waterfall is blocking the power of the P.C.M., which was making it impossible for me to know that you had come back! When she put it in there, I was instantly drawn to Beach City, including picking up on Connie's insecurities about her sword abilities. However, I think Zolo over there did my job for me."

"...Zoro. It's Zoro..." the swordsman growled and twitched his eyebrow.

"Can I ask a silly question? What does 'P.C.M.' stand for anyway?" Petrea asked. "I don't think we ever found out what it meant..."

"Oh that's easy! It's the 'Plot Contrivance Mode!'" Uncle Grandpa explained, causing the words to appear behind him. "Clever, right?"

"...I guess so?" Petrea shrugged, not really understanding what that meant.

"So, I was right in thinking that the badge is the reason why a random Devil Fruit appeared in Beach City," Garnet nodded toward Greg. "A contrivance all the same."

"This has all been so incredibly fascinating," Robin took everything in. "Reality manipulation, magical aliens, dimensional travel...it is almost poetic. Still, if we are talking in terms of plot, how does this story end? Where do we go from here?"

"...I think we lost Robin," Usopp whispered. "She's taken a book metaphor and ran with it."

"Well, I can at least turn off the P.C.M. setting on the badge, but there's still the issue of getting you folks back to the property line," Uncle Grandpa took a seat on the couch.

"...I think you mean Grand Line, Uncle Grandpa," Steven laughed.

"Yeah; that!" Uncle Grandpa joined him.

The sight of the two laughing made Smoker's blood boil. "This isn't a joke! Why is getting us back to the Grand Line an issue? Can it or can it not be done?!"

"Did anybody ever tell you how scary you were?" Uncle Grandpa gulped in fear. "It's hard to say! I...oh! I know! I can replay a cutscene back from Chapter Eight!"

"...what the hell are you talking about?!" Smoker growled.

"Sir, please calm yourself!" Tashigi pleaded. Smoker shot her such a terrifying look that it made her stop talking immediately.

Uncle Grandpa picked up Steven's computer and tried to turn it on. "Hmm...seems like you've got a contaminated computer...I think I know what to do! Nurse!"

"Yes, Dr. Uncle Grandpa?" a second Uncle Grandpa in a nurse's garb asked, holding a medical bag.

"I'm going to have to go...under the knife!" Uncle Grandpa declared as he put on gloves and a face mask. "We will find out what the problem is in a jiffy!"

The sight of Uncle Grandpa in a doctor's uniform caused Priyanka to laugh absentmindedly. "Now he's a doctor! Great! Just great!"

"Connie, I think your mom is starting to lose it," Amethyst whispered.

"Do you blame her?" Greg countered.

"Mr. Computer, what seems to be giving you the hardware hardships?" Dr. Uncle Grandpa asked as he opened up the disc drive.

"Oh it was terrible, doctor!" the computer spoke in a text-to-speak voice, causing even Steven to jump.

"Did...did Steven's computer just talk?!" Pearl pointed to it with a shaky hand.

"Tell Doctor Uncle Grandpa all about it and I'll give you a lollipop!"

"I...it was only supposed to be a search about recipes! Things got out of control fast and next thing I knew...my search engine started blowing up with all kinds of requests!" the computer explained.

"Recipes?" Nami blinked and turned her head toward Sanji, who was beat red. "...Sanji, what did you do?!"

"I was told that I could search anything I wanted on that 'internet' thing, Nami-san! How was I to know that...?" the chef started before getting hoisted in the air by Garnet.

"You are banned from using Steven's computer forever," she warned him. "For. Ev. Er."

Sanji gulped and nodded.

"I'm sorry you had to go through that. Want an antivirus sucker?" The doctor held up a lollipop, which he shoved into the disk drive. With that, the computer began to run normally.

"Well, at least I don't have to put out anything for spyware removal now..." Greg shrugged.

"Yay! My computer is fixed! Thank you, Dr. Uncle Grandpa!" Steven was thrilled.

"Don't thank me. Thank medical school," Uncle Grandpa said. "Ah. Here we go! TubeTube never fails! Watch this little recap on what the Multiverse is all about, kids! Mr. Gus explains it better than I could!"

The room fell silent as a familiar scene played before their eyes. The Gems, rolling with it and assuming that this was only due to Uncle Grandpa's magic, decided not to press how a video of their actions was on the Internet. When it concluded, Uncle Grandpa just smiled. "So, any questions?"

"What was the point of that?" Damian raised his hand.

"Why hasn't Lion woken up in days?" Luffy inquired.

"Are we ever going to get back to the Grand Line?" Tashigi asked.

"Why is a raven like a writing desk?" Uncle Grandpa joined in, much to everyone's annoyance. "What? It seemed like everybody was doing it! Anyway, my control over the other two layers of reality are rather limited. I can go call up and visit TOM, but I really don't have the ability to send a pirate ship back to your world...unless..."

"I'm going to regret this, but unless what?" Pearl sighed.

"Can you go fetch the Belly Bag Badge and that Rifting thing? I just got an idea!" Uncle Grandpa said as a lightbulb appeared over his head...and then promptly crashed on the ground and shattered. "Oops! Better clean that up."

Pearl, wishing to get this ordeal over with, rushed to her room and back with the dreaded Belly Bag Badge and Rifting Stone. Uncle Grandpa looked at the badge and frowned. "Hmm...it's been stuck like this for days...can't have that! Ffo Nrut!"

**"P.C.M. DISENGAGED!"** the badge yelled out.

"...what kind of a language was that?" Steven asked.

"Backwards talk, kid! So, this doohickey managed to warp all the way from your line to our line...and that's the last rift it opened!" Uncle Grandpa exclaimed. "I think we should be okay...but it's gonna need a little tweaking."

Uncle Grandpa picked up Steven's computer again and started to play with it. "Hmm...Photoshop should do nicely...now let's take a picture of these..." The reality warper materialized a camera and snapped a photo of the Belly Bag Badge and Rifting Stone. "...and that!"

He ran over to the Warp Pad and did the same thing, uploading both on Steven's computer as everyone just watched in confusion. "Let's bring that layer down here...give it a salmon color and a yellow star...and save it!" Uncle Grandpa gave a thumbs up. He pressed open the disc drive and, amazingly, a small salmon colored badge with a yellow star appeared.

"My computer had a baby!" Steven said wide-eyed. "What's it's



name?!"

"I present to you the Steven Badge!" Uncle Grandpa bequeathed the device to the half-Gem. "Oh; here's a TM containing Bubble Beam."

"...what?"

"So you just made a copy of the Belly Bag Badge...and changed the colors of it in Photoshop?" Connie asked, clearly having a better grasp on Uncle Grandpa's tactics than practically everyone else.

"True as that may be, it is actually designed for a single, solitary purpose: to act as a direct link to their world! This Rifting thingy is honed in directly to that Band Line, the Belly Bag Badge can create rifts on cue without the aid of magic, and that teleporter thing can be used to link to it! I just combined all three of them!" Uncle Grandpa smiled.

"If I am following correctly..." Pearl allowed herself a moment to process the information. "You used Steven's computer...to create a miniature teleportation unit whose sole purpose is to connect the Warp Pad...to and from the Grand Line?"

"Think of it as a personal teleporter!" Uncle Grandpa grinned. "You pirates can attach it to your ship. Though I don't think the Belly Bag Badge could handle sending it through dimensions again, the Steven Badge should have no problem! All you need to do is create a bubble around the ship again, Steven, and the ship will go through!"

"But then what would happen? Would we take the 'Steven Badge' back to Beach City through the Warp Pad?" Amethyst asked.

"Nope! The badge would stay attached to Merry, allowing you all to have the ability to come back and forth between dimensions..." Uncle Grandpa began before being cut off by the combined voices of Luffy and Steven.

"So, we can visit each other any time we want?!" Luffy asked excitedly.

"And we can get to them using the Warp Pad?!" Steven did the

same.

"This is the best day ever!" The two began to hug each other while crying. "Thank you, Uncle Grandpa!"

"Woah! I didn't say that, sport!" Uncle Grandpa tried to interject. "Dimensional travel is tricky business! If you overuse it, you might not be able to come home! Only use it in great times of need!"

"Gotcha!"

"Well then, since Connie seems to be feeling better about her abilities and Steven can now visit his friends, my work is done!" Uncle Grandpa began to tidy things up. "Boy, that was fun! Oh, here's your Rifting Stone thing! I'll take the Belly Bag Badge so Pizza Steve can do his thing..."

"But you didn't tell us how to activate the badge!" Nami yelled as Uncle Grandpa handed the stone to Garnet, who immediately bubbled it.

"Oh! Just press the star! That's all there is to it. It will only work for any of you, so use it wisely! Well, I'd see you all off, but I've overstayed my welcome," Uncle Grandpa went to the door and opened it.

"Will we ever see you again, Uncle Grandpa?" Connie asked.

"Not unless the author has completely run out of ideas. Until then, just remember to cherish the time you have with your friends and to always have a GOOD MORNING!"

With a slam of the door, Uncle Grandpa disappeared, hopefully never to be seen again. The occupants of the house were silent for a moment as they took in exactly what just transpired before their eyes.

"...so, does this mean what I think it means?" Tashigi asked. "Are...are we able to get back home?"

"Yes," Pearl sighed in relief. "It seems like we finally have a way to return you all to your proper dimension at last."

"Thank god for small miracles," Smoker grinned to himself.

"WE ARE GOING HOME! WE ARE GOING HOME! WE ARE GOING HOME!" Usopp, Chopper, and Luffy cheered together.

"And this isn't going to be a goodbye, since we now have a way to see each other again!" Steven joined them.

"You heard the reality warper," Garnet pointed out. "We can only use that in times of great need. We don't want to be responsible for destroying the Multiverse."

"I know," Steven gave a small smile as he stopped cheering. "But knowing that we have the ability to see each other even if it is on special occasions is better than wondering if we can see each other at all."

"I'm with the kid," Damian patted his back. "This thing will actually allow us to have a direct link with the Going Merry. The Rifting Stone would have probably dropped you off to Little Garden again or something."

"I didn't even think of that!" Steven realized. "Boy, that would have been awkward!"

"It's time to stop focusing on what might have been and starting acting in the present," Smoker said, grabbing his book and novelty desk item. "I assume you all want to give a proper send off to this city...I'll be waiting at your ship."

The Marine left quickly to his destination, leaving everyone else staring. "Did he really not have any fun in his time here?" Connie asked, looking dejected.

"I wouldn't be so sure," Garnet gave a faint smile. "He's more emotional than he lets on."

"How can you tell?" Tashigi asked. "Your Future Vision?"

"Nope. If he didn't care, he wouldn't have taken his souvenirs."

\*AGITR\*

Tashigi was relieved to know that she was finally returning to the Grand Line. In her opinion, this entire trip was a more rewarding experience for her than her superior. As Smoker had hoped, they had managed to keep the Straw Hats somewhat in line...but their strategy to arrest them upon their return had hit a small roadblock, at least for her. The Marine had something she needed to do before she left...something that could and probably would hurt her pride.

"You! Roronoa Zoro!" she yelled to the former pirate hunter as the Straw Hats went their own ways to say their respective goodbyes.

"What do you want?" Zoro asked irritated. "Come to yell at me for striking the kid in the back of the head?"

"As much as I hate to admit it, you did the right thing in the moment..." Tashigi bit her lip before getting her nerve back. "But I do want to talk to you about the fight...or at least the aftermath. What was that about?"

"What was what about?"

"Your little speech to her! From what I know, it isn't something you would do! I want to know what prompted it. Why her? Why then?"

Zoro gave a single chuckle and continued to walk away. "Is that what's bothering you? Did I shatter your little perception of me?"

"Stop ignoring the question! You went out of your way to make that girl feel better about herself and appealed to her mother's better judgement through an apology! What prompted it?" Tashigi demanded with increased passion.

"Do you really want to know? Fine! Remember what I told you about my friend...the one with your face? She reminds me of her!" Zoro stopped walking and regarded her. "Kuina had the same fire that the kid has...and if it killed her, I would feel like I lost her again."

"Is that what happened to...Kuina?" She got too carried away with her training?" Tashigi asked, curious where this was going.

The Marine noticed a shift in Zoro's demeanor. He was guarded before, tense and agitated. Now...now he seemed like he was in

pain. "Training...it would have made sense if it involved her training. She was a master swordsman even at her age...but no. Do you want to know how she died? She died falling down a flight of goddamn stairs! She was going to be the greatest swordsman in the world...but she never got that chance."

Zoro's eyes were now burning red with tears. He clutched his Meito blade and looked down at it. "All I have left of her is this blade...and my dream. She made me realize that it will take willpower and determination to make that dream come true...and I see that in Connie. She might not have as much experience as you or me, but damn it, I know that she is destined for great things!"

"So, that sword...you hold onto it in memory of her?" Tashigi pointed to the Wado Ichimonji. "After all this time?"

"Always," Zoro replied curtly. "Does that answer your question?"

"Yes...yes, I think so..." Tashigi whispered. "Thank you..."

The green-haired swordsman walked toward the pirate ship, leaving Tashigi alone to contemplate what she had just learned. In the past few days, Tashigi had gotten to know the real Roronoa Zoro more than she ever had. He might be a pirate, he might deserve to go to prison, he might deserve to be brought down by her blade...

But she found herself reevaluating her perception of him; something she never would have expected in all of her life. It went against every belief that she ever had, every conviction she stood for as a Marine; but she now realized that there was a morally grey line that she found herself in. Between Straw Hat Luffy's actions in Alabasta, Robin's desire to help Connie and to bring down Peridot, and now Zoro's actions earlier in the day...Tashigi was forced to admit that she was wrong about these pirates.

As long as they continued to break the law, Tashigi would be forced to hunt them...but damn it if she didn't respect them while she did it.

"Aww! You care for him!" a familiar voice called out from seemingly nowhere.

Tashigi looked around to trace the source of it but could find nothing. She chalked it up to her own imagination and made her way to the pirate ship. As she walked away, she failed to notice a small purple robin flying above her.

\*AGITR\*

One by one the pirates returned to their vessel. It was an event that was necessary and caused for mixed feelings in each of them. Damian and Petrea gathered their things and brought them off of the ship, but returned to see them off again. As they were doing so, Genevieve gave them the money she earned painting with Vidalia since she would have no use for it. The two were shocked and grateful for the action, which was no doubt hard for the lazy painter to do. Yes, it was a hard time for the Straw Hats, both temporary and permanent. However, the one who was taking it the hardest was, obviously, Steven.

Though he was a Crystal Gem first and foremost, he now considered himself to be a bonafide Straw Hat pirate. Luffy and the others accepted him without hesitation and even extended that kinship to the Gems, his father, Connie, and even Lion. The fact that he would eventually see his friends again softened the blow, but he hated saying goodbye.

"Lost in thought, Steven?" Genevieve asked, sneaking up behind him as he waited on the Merry. He was sitting down and clutching his Cheeseburger Backpack, which he brought just in case.

"Hmm? Oh! It's just you, Genevieve," Steven sighed. "I'm just thinking about how sad it's gonna be when you guys are gone."

"I know what you mean. I just caught up with Vidalia and Onion," the painter said and sat down beside him. The two of them looked out to the Atlantic Ocean and took in its beauty. "They were on their way here to answer our questions about your dad's Devil Fruit. It turns out it was attached to the hull or something...who knew?"

"That's weird."

"Yeah. I'm gonna miss her. It was nice having a painting partner."

"You know..." Steven started hopefully. "Petrea and Damian are both staying after seeing everybody off...do you want to too?"

The painter gave a small smile and sighed. "As tempting of an offer as that is, I have to decline. You said it yourself, Steven. I want to be the greatest painter in MY world, not yours. It seems like that role has already been filled by the likes of the painters in my book. Besides, I couldn't write to my parents if I was here."

"Your parents?!" Steven asked excitedly. "You never told me about your parents!"

"Yeah. They live out in the West Blue. I always plan to write them more...but I get lazy about it. I typically write them at least once every two months," the painter shrugged.

"Did they know about...you know..." Steven began to ask.

"Baroque Works? Yeah. I didn't tell them for about six months and they reamed me out for it in their reply three months later. Of course, two months after that they sent another letter telling me to follow my heart. They were just happy I was out doing something productive while being happy," Genevieve chuckled. "I'll have to let them know what I'm up to next."

"What are you going to do? Start up an art gallery?"

"Nope; I'm taking Luffy up on his offer to be a permanent part of the crew."

"That's...that's awesome!" Steven gave her a high five and a grin. "You are sure to see some amazing things with the guys!"

"I'm sure I will, but they will not be as amazing as you, Steven Universe. You've been a great inspiration to me..." she blushed. "It's going to be weird painting without my muse."

"Well, I'll be a great inspiration to you in the future too! Next time I see you, I want to see everything you've painted, including the stuff that's based on the pictures Connie is printing out for you right now!"

"It's a deal," Genevieve shook his hand.

"What's a deal, kids?" the familiar voice of Greg said from behind him. "You guys didn't do, like, some kind of freaky blood oath or something, right?"

"Dad, stop being weird!" Steven laughed it off.

"We are just saying our temporary goodbyes, Mr. Universe," Genevieve explained.

The elder Universe nodded. "You want my advice? Never say 'goodbye.' 'Goodbye' implies that you'll never see each other again. Say 'Until the next time' instead."

"Well then, until the next time it is."

"Are we done with the preparations yet?" Smoker yelled from the other side of the ship. "Every second I stay on this pirate ship is an insult to my uniform!"

"We are just waiting for the Gems and Connie!" Luffy folded his arms. "We will not leave without them! Captain's orders!"

"Enjoy that cocky attitude while you can, Straw Hat. It'll be the last order you give as a free man!"

"I thought I told you all to play nice," Garnet called from the shore. Joining her were Pearl, Amethyst, and Connie. Surprisingly, they were not alone. Priyanka, Sadie, Vidalia, and Onion were all beside them. Several of them had things in their hands: Connie had the pictures she promised Genevieve, Sadie held a box of donuts while Garnet carried what appeared to be a large staff.

"We are just having fun. Right, Smokey?" Luffy nudged him playfully.

"...fun...right..." Smoker's eyebrow twitched before he noticed what Garnet was carrying. "Is that my jute?"

"I found it yesterday under the ocean. I figured you deserved it back," Garnet told him flatly. She tossed it to the Marine, who caught it with one hand.



"Well, I think it is time to get this moving along!" Pearl said quickly. "I just hope that this 'Steven Badge' will do its job..."

"Stop worrying so much, Pearl! It'll all be fine!" Amethyst reassured her. "Yo, pirate dudes! Look who I found who wants to see us all off!"

"Figured you guys could use one last round of donuts on me and Lars!" Sadie held up the box, which was instantly grabbed by Luffy's stretched hand. "Gah!"

"Alright! Food!"

"Down, tiger!" Nami took the box away from him immediately. "No food for you until everyone gets one!"

"Meanie!"

"Thank you, Sadie!" Steven waved. "You are awesome!"

"It's for them, Steven! You can eat them any time you want," Sadie laughed. The girl then locked eyes with Smoker, who gave her a little nod. She smiled and returned it with a wave. "You crazy pirate people and sea cops get back safe, you hear?"

"And don't be strangers! Genevieve told me you guys can come back here, so you better get your butts back here for more fun sooner than later! This past week has been a hoot and a half. Isn't that right, Onion?" Vidalia waved to them with Onion doing the same. He folded his hands like a heart and held it up, causing Petrea to merely smile and nod.

"Aye-aye!"

"Come on, Connie!" Pearl ushered her. "We have a mission to finish! Dr. Maheswaran, I am sure this will be a quick little excursion and..."

"I'm coming too," Priyanka put her hand on Connie's shoulder.

"WHAT?!" Connie jumped, clutching her still wounded side. "What do you mean by that?!"

"I told you I want to take a more vested interest in your training; I don't see the harm in seeing your friends off with you," Priyanka gave her daughter a strict look. "Besides, you are still wounded rather badly. Unless you would rather stay here with me..."

"Dr. Maheswaran, I am not sure if that is a good idea..." Pearl started to explain. "The Grand Line can be rather dangerous and..."

"With Marines, pirates, alien warriors, and enhanced humans by my side? I think I will be fine," Priyanka began to board the ship. "If it is safe for my daughter then I see no reason why I couldn't be here either."

"I...I..." Pearl wanted to argue but looked into Connie's pleading eyes. It was clear she wanted to go back to the Grand Line at least one last time. Pearl still had strong objections to the matter, but if Priyanka wanted to begin to experience Connie's life, it was not her place to stop her. All it meant was that she would do her best to protect her for both Steven and Connie's sake. "I think you are right."

With the Gems, Connie, and Priyanka's presence, everyone who was coming along on the trip was now on board. Nami did a last minute check to make sure any and all possessions were on board and that the final preparations were made.

"I think we are good to go if you all are," Nami concluded, patting the mast. "Any objections?"

"None whatsoever," Smoker cracked his knuckles and examined his jute.

"I think we are as ready as we are going to be," Usopp nodded after looking over the ship. "Merry looks like she's ready to be seafaring again."

"Are you sure you want to come, Priyanka?" Greg asked one final time. "Who knows what will happen out there..."

"I'm a doctor, Greg. I deal with life and death every day. I will be fine and that's the last I'll hear of it," she stated with finality.

"...okay..." Greg gulped, not wanting to incur her wrath.

Searching through his pocket, Steven pulled out the badge that was named after him and handed it to Luffy. The pirate held it up and saw it instantly snatched by Nami, the sensible member of the crew.

"Wherever we put this badge is where it is going to stay. I think that it would be safest in the storage deck. It would be well hidden there and would go with all of the other important things we have collected," Nami smiled. "Namely treasure!"

"Of course," the Straw Hats rolled their eyes.

"Then it is decided. Nami, set up the badge. Steven, prepare yourself to bubble the ship. When the ship is bubbled, we will press the star and see ourselves off," Garnet ordered.

"Sounds good to me!" Luffy started to jump up and down. "I'm getting excited!"

Steven prepared himself in the center of the ship. He looked out to the Temple one last time, happy to think about the fun times he had in the past week. In fact, all of his recent adventures with the Straw Hats were moments he would cherish for years to come. Though he was afraid when he first landed on Damian and Petrea's boat, he ended up having a wonderful adventure. Painting with Genevieve, making snow angels with Chopper, dancing with Luffy, training with Zoro, playing the ukulele Nami bought him, eating Sanji's cooking, and fishing with Usopp were all things he would look back on fondly.

But even Steven knew all good things had to come to an end.

"Ready, Steven?" Luffy called to him.

"Ready, captain!" Steven nodded, focusing his energy from his Gem. At once a giant bubble surrounded Merry, forcing Steven to concentrate as hard as he could to keep everything together. He closed his eyes, ready to open them when they reached the Grand Line.

\*AGITR\*

"GAH! WHAT IS HAPPENING?!" Priyanka yelled moments later.

Steven felt his bubble get bombarded, causing his eyes to jolt wide open. Through the pink lens of his creation, Steven saw the vast ocean of the Grand Line once more. However, it wasn't the only familiar sight he recognized...

"Is that Luffy's grandpa?!" Steven asked worriedly.

"Damn it! We returned literally right where and when we left!" Smoker cursed, bracing himself.

"It's just like when we left Beach City..." Garnet told herself.

"We really should have asked Uncle Grandpa how time worked with that thing before he left," Amethyst shrugged.

"Now isn't the time to think about that, Amethyst! Stay focused!" Pearl yelled at her.

"Speak for yourself! I missed this last time! This seems like a blast!" Amethyst laughed.

"We are GOING to be blasted if you keep that kind of attitude!" Usopp panicked. "Steven, for the love of all that is sacred and holy, keep that bubble up!"

"It's...it's hard!" Steven winced as another cannonball hit and bounced off of the pink sphere.

"IS THIS A TYPICAL SITUATION YOU YOU WOULD FACE HERE, CONNIE?!" Priyanka ran to look for cover.

The young girl blushed and gasped as she watched the cannonball fly away. "Mom, this is the only time this happened! Even in the civil war..."

"CIVIL WAR?! YOU NEVER MENTIONED A CIVIL WAR!"

"Yes I did! We saved Alabasta from the clutches of the tyrannical Crocodile and..." Connie tried to explain herself.

"I don't think now is the time to be arguing about this!" Sanji yelled to them. "Luffy's grandfather is literally trying to kill us right now! That

takes priority!"

"Well what do we do? If we retaliate it can be considered an act of war..." Pearl panicked. "The last thing we want is to further disrupt interdimensional affairs!"

"Can't we just talk it out or something?!" Petrea asked worriedly. "There has to be a way of getting his attention!"

"Wait..." Greg interjected. "Get his attention? I can do that!"

"Mr. Universe, I don't think playing your air guitar is going to..." Tashigi started to say before getting blown backwards.

**"HEY! STOP FIRING! THERE ARE INNOCENT CIVILIANS AND MARINES ON BOARD!"** Greg yelled loudly. The Straw Hats and Gems covered their ears in agony. Greg's voice was so loud and powerful that it popped his son's bubble and knocked back the final volley of cannonballs into the ocean.

The musician started to pant as he took a knee to catch his breath. The bombardment had momentarily ceased and it seemed that both ships were caught off-guard by the outburst. "Holy...it worked!" Greg laughed and wheezed at the same time.

"I'M DEAF!" Chopper clutched his ears and rolled around on the floor. "I NEED A DOCTOR!"

"A LITTLE WARNING NEXT TIME WOULD BE NICE!" Amethyst moaned.

"DAD, WHAT DID YOU DO?" Steven yelled, clearly a byproduct of his father's wailing.

"Simple, sport! I can control my sound waves right? Well, if messing around with Adobe Audition has taught me anything, it is that sound can not only be manipulated but **AMPLIFIED!** I just increased the decibels of my voice and blamo!" Greg blushed, clearly proud of himself. "I really don't know **HOW** I did that, but I did!"

"**THAT...THAT IS AWESOME!**" Steven cheered loudly to compensate his temporary loss of hearing. "...**THOUGH I WISH**

THIS RINGING WOULD STOP!"

"You did well, Greg," Garnet gave him a thumbs up. "And it looked like it worked. It seems we are about to get company..."

The few members of the Straw Hats who were able to looked to Garp's ship. Sure enough, a small boat was floating toward them containing one lone occupant. He was a tall older gentleman wearing a dog hat. Luffy pulled himself together to take a peek and found himself backing up in horror. "GAH! GRAMPS IS COMING!"

"The famous Marine himself..." Smoker muttered. "You all need to pull yourselves together. I advise you Gems to get back to Beach City and let us take care of this..."

"NO! WE AREN'T LEAVING UNTIL WE KNOW THE STRAW HATS ARE SAFE!" Steven stood his ground while trying to clear his eardrums with his pinky.

"Don't be an idiot, kid! Do you forget that you have a bounty?! You all could be killed!" Smoker tried to reason with him.

"Look, we will be fine! We'll just say that the Straw Hats are holding us hostage and that you and Tashigi was going to return us back to Alabasta!" Greg tried to explain his plan. "What? It's the best idea I have! I don't see anyone else doing anything productive at the present moment!"

"That is preposterous!" Pearl argued. "He would see through that in a second!"

"Not necessarily," Tashigi got up and shook her head. "I think we can pull this off...but it won't work with everyone on deck..."

"WHAT ARE YOU SAYING?" Nami asked loudly.

"If the Vice Admiral were to come on board, he would no doubt question the appearance of a short purple woman and a tall...I don't even know what color your skin is Garnet, but it's not natural," Tashigi explained.

"It's cerise," Garnet folded her arms.

"NO, SERIOUSLY...WHAT ARE YOU SAYING?" Nami tried again.  
"I CANT HEAR ANYTHING!"

Tashigi regarded her and sighed. "Listen, there is no time to explain this again. Pearl, I think you could pass for a human, but you need to hide that gemstone..."

"Does Luffy really look like the kind of person who would hold a hostage?" Zoro asked. "He's an innocent idiot!"

"We don't have a choice, Zoro! He's getting closer by the second!" Tashigi pointed to Garp, who was surveying the situation.

"Fine. Amethyst and I will hide ourselves. Pearl, put on a hat. Tashigi and Greg's plan is our best shot to get through this," Garnet started toward the cabin, grabbing Amethyst with her.

"Aww, no fair! I want to be here for a fight!" she pouted.

"...where does one find a hat on here?" Pearl asked, looking around.

"Wear my headband," Zoro untied it from his arm. "It'll hide it better than a hat would."

The Gem looked at the headband and shuddered. "...this is degrading."

"There's only one thing left to do..." Tashigi sighed and walked over to Robin, who was doing her best to stay toward the back. "You should stay out of sight as well. You are one of the most wanted criminals on the Grand Line. I'm sure you'd be arrested on sight..."

Robin raised an eyebrow in surprise. "Isn't that what you want?"

"Think of this as my way of apologizing after the other night..." Tashigi looked down at her feet.

"...thank you," the former Miss Allsunday gave a small smile as she joined Garnet and Amethyst.

The Marine sighed and began to question whether she would regret her choice. Regardless, she was brought back to reality when the

ship started to shake. Tashigi looked and saw that Garp himself had jumped up from his little boat onto the deck of the Going Merry. He crossed his arms and had a giant smile etched on his face. "Vice Admiral Garp!"

"Ah! Captain Smoker! Master Chief Petty Officer Tashigi! So you're the Marines that the loud, booming voice was talking about!" Garp laughed. "What was that anyway?"

"That would be me, sir..." Greg weakly raised his hand. "Sorry about that. I'm still learning how to use my Devil Fruit thing and..."

"Don't worry about it, son. Strange though...my men and I just busted up a major Devil Fruit black market ring and had confiscated all of their cargo. I thought that there was a sound fruit in that haul..." Garp thought about it and shrugged.

"Could...could it be possible it got knocked overboard during the cannon fire?" Greg asked curiously.

"Could be. I don't know...whatever; that's not important. The point is that if you didn't do that, I'd still be pelting these cannonballs at you. Still, how did two Marines end up on my grandson's ship?"

"...that would be a long story, sir..."

"Speaking of, where is my idiot grandson?!" Garp yelled, looking around the ship until he found Luffy hiding behind the mast, silently praying to himself. "GET OUT HERE AND GIVE YOUR GRANDFATHER A HUG, BOY!"

Garp jumped over the Straw Hats, making his way to Luffy. In one quick movement, he grabbed the pirate by the collar and raised him in the air.

"GAH! SAVE ME!" Luffy yelled fearfully.

"DANGER! LUFFY HAS BEEN CAPTURED BY HIS GRANDFATHER!" Chopper wailed.

"Don't hurt him! You can't hurt family, Mr. Marine Guy!" Steven pleaded to him. "Your grandson may be a pirate but...are they



sleeping?"

Sure enough, both Garp and Luffy had fallen asleep while standing up. Steven began to laugh at the situation while the others just stood there in bewilderment and shock.

"Words fail me," Usopp said.

"Is this a normal experience for you all in this universe?" Priyanka whispered. "This is utterly insane!"

"Are you okay, mom?" Connie asked.

"I can't say yet, honey...why don't you ask me later?"

After a moment, Garp awoke and looked at the slumbering form of his grandson in his hand. "Impudent brat!"

The Marine hit him, causing him to awaken quickly. "OW! Whatcha do that for?!"

"For falling asleep and being a disrespectful pirate!" Garp yelled. "Look at you! It's bad enough you took all the training I gave you and became a pirate, but kidnapping? Luffy, I'm disappointed in you!"

"Kidnapping? What are you...?" Luffy started before getting interrupted by a cough from Greg. "Oh! That. Right..."

"I have to say, you seem to be rather generous with your hostages' accommodations..." Garp narrowed his eyes.

"That would be because of us, sir!" Tashigi quickly interjected. "We were negotiating with the pirates to return the hostages back to their home!"

"Were you now?" Garp asked suspiciously. "Regardless, though I am touched at the prospect of a family reunion, I actually have a job to do...something you wouldn't know since you are a damn pirate!"

"Being a pirate is a job!" Luffy argued. "I've told you since I was a kid that I was going to be the Pirate King!"

"And I told you that you were going to be a great Marine!"

"Connie, this is exactly why I want us to have open communication," Priyanka told her daughter.

"Wait, if our idiot captain wasn't your mission, why did you open fire on us?" Sanji asked.

"Besides the fact that you are pirates? To say hello, of course! I wasn't expecting that pink bubble thing though..." Garp looked over at Steven, who gave an awkward wave. "Anyway, I've been sent out in search of a pirate that has been rumored to be spotted with you, Luffy...something about a giant woman..."

"What?!" Pearl stammered shaking her hands around. "There's no giant woman here! Nope! Just all of us humans!"

The Vice Admiral regarded her as several of the Straw Hats face-palmed. "...I can see that, missy. It's a shame too. I was hoping to meet her. She was pretty funny-looking if you ask me."

"I have never seen that giant woman, but I doubt she would be considered 'funny-looking' by any means..." Pearl's face began to turn beat blue.

Garp merely smiled. "It's true! I know you are just a civilian and all, but wait until you see the new wanted poster for her. Gave her the epitaph 'Giant Onigiri Magician' myself since her head just reminded me so much of food."

"I am sure it does NOT look like food!" Pearl got defensive. "I am sure it was a perfectly symmetrical and well-adjusted giant head!"

"Even so, I wonder if she would taste like onigiri..." Garp licked his lips. "Mmmm, I'm starting to salivate..."

"He's totally Luffy's grandfather," Usopp tried not to laugh.

"Could you speak up? It's still hard to make out whispering!" Nami groaned in frustration.

"Why would you WANT to eat a Gem...giant woman? That sounds

barbaric!" Pearl asked in a shocked, offended voice.

"Eh, doesn't matter now does it...since she CLEARLY isn't here at all..." Garp said staring directly at Pearl. "Still...if she was, I'd ask her about that ridiculous outfit she was wearing. Who wears a tuxedo in the desert?"

"Maybe it was just a part of her body and not her clothing!" Pearl snapped.

"...so, you are saying the giant woman was naked?" Garp began to laugh. "You picked a hilarious hostage, Luffy."

As Garp began to laugh, the other Straw Hats looked at Pearl and tried to wrap their heads around the idea that she might technically be naked. As for Greg, he did everything he could not to bury his face in his arms due to embarrassment.

"So...what do I do now?" Garp stopped laughing and got serious. "On this ship alone we have three people with bounties; two of which jointly brought down a Shishibukai. That's not even counting the hostages and the pirates that DON'T have bounties yet..."

"Sir, if I may speak?" Smoker made his way to Garp. "My subordinate and I were in the process of handling the situation before you arrived. If you wish, we can continue to do so."

The hero Marine glanced once more at the crew of pirates and locked eyes with Pearl, who still seemed a bit heated. After a moment his gaze landed on Steven, who again noticed with a smile and a wave. Finally, his eyes widened and seemed to have made his choice. "Hmm...well it does seem like you two have this handled...and my target clearly isn't here..."

"You have my guarantee, sir, that Justice will be served," Smoker nodded.

"HOWEVER!" Garp yelled loudly, causing everyone to jump. "There is one final piece of business I have here...something that I expect you all to comply with or else you will have to face the consequences!"

"Wha...wha...what is it?" Luffy gulped.

The Marine pointed to a discarded box and made a very serious face. "I want a donut!"

The crew fell backwards in shock at the request. However, Luffy jumped up and confronted his grandfather. "You can't! Those donuts were gifts! They weren't meant for you!"

"You think you can tell your grandfather what he can and cannot have?! I raised you better than that!"

"You didn't raise me at all!"

As grandfather and grandson locked heads, Steven walked over and picked up the box of donuts Sadie left them. He did a quick count and counted all of the Straw Hats and Marines. "Since Zoro isn't eating his donut, we have enough for your grandfather, Luffy! Here!"

The half-Gem held up the Big Donut box to the feuding Monkey family and waited for them to notice. Garp finally looked over and adopted a large grin. "Hmm, the 'Tiger Millionaire' has manners, eh? Good for you," he said as he grabbed a chocolate frosted donut. After a bite, tears appeared in his eyes. "This might be the best donut I have ever eaten! Thank you, brats!"

He made his way to the side of the ship that his boat was docked on and prepared to leave. Before he did so, Garp turned around and regarded his grandson. "The next time I see you, I won't be alone. I've got a couple of trainees who are just dying to see you, Luffy. Let me tell you; they have potential to be great Marines. They'll bring you to Justice in no time."

"Bring 'em on, gramps! Nothing is going to stand between me and my dream!" Luffy stuck his tongue out at him.

"Nothing but me, my idiot grandson," Garp couldn't help but smile. "They are all yours, Captain Smoker. Give 'em hell!"

With that, Garp jumped off the ship and started to go back toward his own vessel. As soon as he was sufficiently far enough away, everybody let out a joint sigh.

"How. The. Hell. Did. That. Work?" Damian asked, wiping the sweat from his brow. "I just had a panic attack."

"Pearl, what were you thinking?!" Greg yelled at the Gem. "You nearly gave everything away! He was clearly provoking you!"

"He was insulting Sardonyx! That is a very sacred fusion to me!" Pearl defended herself.

"...so..." Usopp decided to ask. "Are we going to address how you are basically naked?"

"I am most certainly not naked!" Pearl stamped her foot down.

"Are you wearing clothing that can be removed from your body?" Genevieve asked.

"...no...I technically do not...it IS my body..."

"Then you're naked," Genevieve observed. "Congratulations."

"Wait...if you are naked...how do you poop?" Luffy asked curiously. "Wait...CAN you poop?"

"WHAT A VULGAR QUESTION!" Pearl yelled angrily.

"...you people are so juvenile," Priyanka shook her head. The doctor looked to the Marine returning to the ship and started to laugh. "I cannot believe that I just survived that."

Connie started to laugh weakly. "This wasn't actually that bad, mom."

The doctor opened her mouth to speak but decided against it in order to keep herself calm. As she did so, the Gems and Robin returned to the deck and surveyed the situation.

"Aww, you guys didn't even throw a punch? Lame," Amethyst sighed. "I was hoping for a good fight."

"...that is the exact opposite of what we wanted," Steven pointed out.

"Lame," she reiterated dejectedly.

"Disregarding Amethyst, I'd like to say that was a job well done. Good plan," Garnet acknowledged Greg and Tashigi. "But now that this situation is resolved, it is time we returned home."

"Aww! Do you have to?!" Luffy asked with puppy-dog eyes.

"I don't want you guys to leave!" Chopper sniffled.

"We have to, little Chopper. This was only ever us seeing you off...until the next adventure that is," Garnet pulled down her sunglasses and winked one of her three eyes.

"Adventure?" Steven asked. He smiled and pulled out the ukulele Nami bought him in Alabasta from the Cheeseburger Backpack. "You all know what they say about adventures, right?"

"Are we being treated to one last song from our musician?" Nami smiled. "Sounds like my hearing came back at the perfect time."

"Who said you could sing a song? We have business to attend to, Straw Hat!" Smoker growled, knocking his jute on the floor of the deck. "I told you that you'd be arrested when you got back here!"

"Oh. You want a fight, Smokey?" Luffy asked dejectedly. "Could it please wait until after the song? If this is the last time we see Steven for who knows how long, I'd at least like to hear one last song!"

The Marine was about to respond when his eyes found the Beach City donut box. As he stared at it, Tashigi put her hand on his shoulder and squeezed. He sighed and put the jute away. "...Straw Hat, I WILL be the one to arrest you. Do you understand me?"

"Wait...what?" Luffy asked, confused. "So, you don't want to fight?"

"Not now. Not like this," Smoker grabbed a cigar and went to light it. "I might have told you that I would arrest you when we returned here, but I also said I would consider letting you idiots go. After everything that happened...it wouldn't be right. Besides, Tashigi and I have a farcical ceremony to prepare for."

"...are...are you serious?" Luffy stood there with his mouth wide open. "SMOKEY, YOU ARE THE BEST!"

"Thank you, Captain Smoker!" Steven ran over and gave him a giant hug. "Can you at least stay for a goodbye song?!"

"Please, captain?" Connie asked too, joining Steven and Luffy. All three of them gave him puppy-dog eyes at the same time; a force to be reckoned with for sure.

"...one song. Then I'm grabbing my Billow Raft and leaving before I change my mind..." Smoker rubbed his temples, a defeated man.

"Told you he was more emotional than he let on," Garnet whispered.

Steven took his ukulele and began to strum a calm and upbeat melody as happily as he could. *"The greatest adventure is what lies ahead. Today and tomorrow are yet to be said. The chances, the changes are all yours to make. The mold of your life is in your hands to break."*

Greg, knowing the song, joined his son with his own instrument: himself. *"The greatest adventure is there if you're bold. Let go of the moment that life makes you hold. To measure the meaning can make you delay; It's time you stop thinkin' and wasting the day."*

*"The man who's a dreamer and never takes leave, who thinks of a world that is just make-believe, will never know passion, will never know pain. Who sits by the window will one day see rain,"* the two Universe boys sang in harmony as the Straw Hats and Marines; Gems, humans, and reindeer; everyone on the Going Merry stopped and listened in the moment.

*"The greatest adventure is what lies ahead. Today and tomorrow are yet to be said. The chances, the changes are all yours to make. The mold of your life is in your hands to break,"* Greg sang solo once more, bowing out to let Steven finish the song.

*"The greatest adventure is what lies ahead..."* Steven smiled, looking up at his friends. The group gave him and Greg well-deserved applause, resulting in them taking a bow.

Upon completion of the song, Smoker and Tashigi took their leave. They made sure to thank Steven and the Gems for their hospitality one final time before they departed. At last, the Going Merry was occupied by only pirates and their allies once more.

"Steven!" Genevieve called to him as he took one last walk around the ship with Connie. "I meant to give this to you before...but it was really hard to find the strength to."

She handed him a canvas painting that made Steven's eyes turn to stars.

"Wow! It's you, Steven!" Connie exclaimed.

"The painting you made of me in Little Garden! I...I can't take this!" Steven started to tear up.

"You can and you will," the painter smirked. "Next time I come over, I expect to see that and the Snow-Garnet painting hanging up."

"You got it, dude!" Steven laughed, wiping a small tear from his eye.

"Connie, I owe you a painting of you wielding that sword of yours..." Genevieve turned to her and opened her arms up for a hug. Connie saw that she too had teared up. "I owe you for the pictures. Thank you for being a great friend. You two take care of each other, you hear?"

"Of course, Genevieve!" Connie started to join her and Steven in the crying club. "We'll see each other again before you know it!"

"I'm holding you to that!"

As the trio laughed one last time, Pearl motioned everyone into the storage deck. Though it was not designed for such a large group of people in one sitting, their temporary discomfort did not bother them. Everybody knew that this moment had to come eventually...

It was time to return to the status quo. It was time to go home.

"Just push the button whenever you all are ready," Nami explained to Garnet, who was looking over the embedded badge. Everyone



else was taking small sips of the drinks Sanji brought out to share one last time before they departed, focusing on it instead of what had to happen next.

"Gotcha," Garnet nodded, her eyes focusing on Steven. "The floor is yours, Steven."

"I...I have something to say," Steven gulped and regarded each of his pirate brethren. "The last few weeks have been nothing short of amazing. I've learned so much from each of you...and I can't wait to learn and do more in the future! We can't be upset that this is happening, but we should get excited for what comes next!"

"Well-spoken," Robin smiled.

"Each of you are family to me, and you will be for the rest of my life..." Steven wiped away the stream of tears and snot pouring down his face. "That's why I can't say goodbye to you guys...because family never says goodbye. Until the next time...Straw Hats and Crystal Gems for life?"

One by one the Straw Hats lifted their glasses toward Steven and his family. They, in turn, followed their lead until everyone was prepared to toast not only to Steven's belief in them all, but to the bond that they now shared together.

"STRAW HATS AND CRYSTAL GEMS FOR LIFE!"

\*AGITR\*

Night in Beach City was very similar to what it was on the Grand Line: cold, yet inviting.

The Steven Badge had worked perfectly. The Gems, Universes, Maheswarans, Petrea, and Damian had all made it back in one piece. At this point, they could not tell for sure if the badge would reconnect them to the Going Merry like Uncle Grandpa said it would, but Steven kept his hopes up.

Steven had bid Connie and her mother a fond goodnight upon arrival as Priyanka wanted to go home and process the experience she just underwent. Connie assured Steven that she would be okay

and only needed to sleep it off. The half-Gem expected to talk about it in the morning.

As for Greg, he returned to his beloved van to catch up on some much-needed rest. The extended use of his new gifts had worn him out, but not enough to give his son a goodnight hug. All that remained were the Gems and Beach City's newest residents.

"Petrea and Damian, I suppose we will sit down and figure out your living situation in the morning," Pearl sighed, taking a seat on the couch. "This entire ordeal was far too exhausting for my liking."

"So that means they can stay the night here?!" Steven asked, eager to snuggle up in bed himself.

"Well we can't just throw them out," Pearl explained.

"Unless you want to be," Garnet added.

Petrea chuckled slightly. "I think taking the couch would be preferable if you are offering. I know this wasn't the most thought-out plan in the world, but I know it will all work itself out in time."

"It always does," Steven smiled.

"I really want to thank you all for...you know, putting up with me," Damian shifted nervously. "I know this might be uncomfortable and..."

"Chillax, dude! We like you guys. You'll have a blast on Beach City. Heck, you are good friends with the Frybos and Blondie has her own fan club with Vidalia's son," Amethyst laughed.

"Oh my god, I never even thought of that," Petrea whispered. "Oh my god, I'll be living in the same town as him."

"Now isn't the time to be thinking of such things. The Straw Hats are home safe and sound, Smoker didn't arrest anyone, Steven is back, the Rifting Stone is secure, and Peridot is bubbled in the Burning Room," Garnet folded her arms and joined Pearl on the couch. "I think that constitutes as a series of missions well-completed."

"Peridot..." Steven whispered to himself. His mind raced back to the previous night where she kidnapped him, mentioning something about a "Cluster."

"I don't know about all of you, but I am beat!" Amethyst yawned. "I think I'm gonna search my garbage pile for a quick bite to eat and then I'm heading to sleepsville!"

"I think that is a good idea...garbage excluded," Damian yawned. "Tomorrow is going to be a long day of figuring out the mess I got you all in."

"Hush, you," Petrea sighed, letting out her own yawn. "It will all work out. The only mess you need to worry about is the one that you will make helping set up new linens for the couch and sleeping bag. I'll be in the bathroom changing into my pajamas."

"Have fun, Petrea!" Steven waved. "Come on, Damian. I'll help you set this up."

"You're such a charming host, Steven," Damian chuckled.

"Hey, you took care of me...so now I'm going to take care of you!"

\*AGITR\*

One by one the beach house seemingly emptied. The former "Mr. 5 Pair" had settled down for the night and fell asleep in their new dimension peacefully. The Gems had retreated into the Temple. Steven...

Steven was wide awake.

The boy shuffled around in his favorite banana pajamas and looked around his room. He stared at the drawing Genevieve left him, the one they bonded over in Little Garden, and felt sadness. He missed his pirate friends and he missed the fun adventures they went on. Yes, he would see them again eventually, just as the proverbial carnival returns to town, but it would only be at times of great need. Who knew when that would be? The amount of memories he had from his adventures in the Grand Line could have filled dozens of books, but he stopped himself from getting to emotional.

In the process, he allowed his mind to drift elsewhere. Garnet had reminded him about Peridot, which caused him to replay those moments in his mind over and over again. The Homeworld Gem was frightened to the point of abducting him to try to get off the planet. Whatever this "Cluster" was, it meant the end of the planet as he knew it.

And the Gems had brushed it off.

Nine times out of ten, he believed that the Crystal Gems knew what they were doing. However, the recent incidents with Sardonyx and even Pearl being unable to foresee how far Connie would go in the duel showed him that they were just as fallible as any person...or even talking reindeer for that matter. Who was to say that they weren't right about Peridot?

Looking under his bed, Steven pulled out a small green and black boot. The half-Gem recalled how he retrieved the item not too long before he found the Rifting Stone. He was trapped with the Gems in a trap laid out by Peridot, but now Steven had to ask himself why she had acted that way.

Why didn't Peridot want help facing this "Cluster?" What WAS a "Cluster?"

"If only I could sleep...if only I knew..." Steven said to himself. "I should be able to move past this...but why was Peridot so scared? I wish I could ask her..."

At that very moment, Steven's gem glowed bright pink. Steven looked down, surprised at the sight and confused as to why it was happening. Suddenly, the Temple Gate opened up, showing a glimpse of the clouds that adorned his mother's room.

"Hmm...I think I know what I'm doing tonight..." Steven told himself as he jumped down to the floor and ran past his sleeping guests and into the room of Rose Quartz.

"Room! I want to speak to Peridot!"

\*AGITR\*

Smoker was irritated beyond belief at his present situation. He thought it was bad enough to be stuck for a little under a week with the Straw Hat pirates, but if there was one thing Smoker hated more than pirates it was self-righteous bureaucrats. Only days after his return to the Grand Line, he and Tashigi were summoned by Admiral Sengoku himself to Mariejois: the capitol of the World Government.

It was assumed that the reason for such a summons was due to Crocodile's capture. Though it was covered up by the outside world, the fact that pirates were responsible for the liberation of Alabasta was an insult to the World Government as a whole. Despite his dedication to Justice, Smoker was not happy about their decision to promote him and give him all of the glory. As such, he and Tashigi decided to use their waiting time rather productively in a way benefiting how they felt about the situation.

"Calm down, Tashigi," Smoker scolded as he looked up from his book. "You are going to make me lose my place with your damn moaning."

"This puzzle game is really frustrating, sir!" Tashigi growled. "The blocks are not working my way at all!"

"It's only a game. Don't lose sleep over it," Smoker shook his head and returned to his "light" reading.

After a few moments of waiting, the door opened up and the Marines were ushered into a room. Tashigi turned off her gaming system and put it in her pocket while Smoker put his bookmark in place and prepared for the worst case scenario.

Waiting for them in the room was Sengoku himself and five other men. Sengoku was easy enough to be around for the few times he met him and Smoker had to admit that he respected the man. But the others...

They were the Gorosei, the leaders of the World Government. Despite being summoned to Mariejois, Smoker didn't expect to have them included in this meeting. It made him curious and, truth be told, excited.

"Ah, Commodore Smoker and Ensign Tashigi," the bespectacled Marine Fleet Admiral acknowledged them. "I apologize for keeping you waiting. It seems you were more prepared for that than I was. Is it any good?"

"Is what good, sir?" Smoker asked, deciding not to show his annoyance of his new rank.

"That book you are carrying," Sengoku asked, pointing to the book under Smoker's arm.

"It is eye-opening to say the least," he admitted. "I assume we weren't summoned here to discuss literature, correct?"

"Unfortunately. Recent events have forced all of us to reevaluate a great many things...especially considering the void left by Crocodile's...arrest," Sengoku sighed. "As it stands, I'll be meeting with the other Shishibukai and other higher-ups to discuss THAT issue in a few days. But today is not about Crocodile as much as it is about you and your experiences."

"Oh? I'm afraid I don't follow. I thought I was very clear in my report," Smoker furrowed his brow.

"Yes, you were clear, but apparently our hosts here are rather concerned by some of its contents."

"We will take it from here, Fleet Admiral Sengoku," one of the Gorosei spoke up. He was an older gentleman with a grey dreadlocks and a scar on the left side of his face. "Would you please leave us."

"Now hold on, Elder Noda! These are my people and..." Sengoku looked alarmed.

"That was not a question. This matter involves only these two and these two alone," Elder Noda frowned.

Sengoku shot them an angry look before resigning himself to the futility of the situation. He left the room, locking eyes with Smoker before he did so. He gave the man a small nod of appreciation and awaited what was no doubt about to be an interesting conversation.

"Let's not waste any more time than we have to, commodore...ensign. When you first reported Crocodile's treason, you spoke of, and I quote, 'magical alien female invaders.' Am I correct?" Elder Noda asked plainly.

Smoker kept a neutral face and was pleased to see Tashigi doing the same. He should have known that the appearance of beings like the Crystal Gems would cause a stir for the bigwigs. "It sounds right."

"Based on this image captured on your vessel, may I assume that the wanted criminal known as 'Sardonyx' was among them?"

"What gave it away? Was it the multiple arms, the astounding height, or the rock on her forehead?" Smoker asked sarcastically.

"This is a very serious matter, Commodore Smoker!" a bald elder with glasses scolded him. "We are talking about the stability of the World Government as a whole!"

"Calm yourself, Elder Ogata," Elder Noda requested. "Commodore Smoker, it is vital that we learn everything there is to learn about this pirate and others like her. Vice Admiral Garp reported that she was not a part of the Straw Hat pirate crew. Where did she go to? How many other Gems were there?"

"Gems?" Tashigi asked, a bit surprised to hear the term. She thought in her head and gave an answer to mask it. "There were three I believe...the tall one, the dainty one, and the one with the afro..."

"So, three Gems all together...interesting. Thank you, Ensign Tashigi. Do either of you know of their current whereabouts?" the scarred elder asked.

"Nope. I think they went back to their dimension or wherever it was that they came from. They just vanished without a trace..." Smoker kept his best poker face on, wanting to ride this out as long as possible.

"I see. Regardless, we will keep our eyes and ears open. I suggest

that you report any further sightings directly to Fleet Admiral Sengoku himself. We will make sure you receive no delay or skeptical questions on the other end," Elder Noda closed his eyes and gripped his walking cane.

"Of course, sirs. If we can do anything to assist in these matters, please keep us in the loop!" Tashigi saluted quickly.

"And you, Commodore Smoker?"

"If that's what you want, then that's what I will do," Smoker forced himself to salute as well. "Is there anything else my subordinate and I can do for you?"

"There is one final thing: keep this meeting to yourself. This conversation never happened. You never met with us. Do I make myself clear?"

"Crystal," Smoker nodded and started to walk out with Tashigi in tow, appreciating his own private last laugh.

After exchanging trivial banter with Sengoku about Crocodile, Smoker found himself alone with Tashigi as they continued toward their ship. "You did the right thing by describing Pearl and Garnet. They could have learned about their appearances from the people of Alabasta. Don't beat yourself up about it."

"This doesn't add up, commodore," she frowned. "Why are they more concerned about the Gems than Crocodile's uprising?"

"The better question is how they know that they ARE Gems," Smoker bit down on his cigar. "I never used that term in my reports. The only other people who knew that were Crocodile and Hina. I trust Hina implicitly and I doubt Crocodile would be cooperative with his former overlords..."

"So what does that mean?"

"It means this wasn't the first time this world has encountered Gems..." Smoker took a large drag of his cigar. "...and something tells me it won't be the last..."



**END PART ONE**

# The Creator Commentary

Greeting everyone and welcome to the final chapter of *A Gem in the Rough!*

As last chapter served as the ending of the first part of the story, I have decided to bridge the gap between sections by writing up some creator commentary. I will break down chapter by chapter little details about the story, examine story elements, point out references I might have made along the way, and much, much more! For those of you who were hoping for a new chapter immediately, fret not. There will not be much of a break between this update and the next one, which will continue the story back on the Grand Line. If you wish to skip this write up, I will not judge you.

For those of you who remained, let's dive right in!

Before we begin, I originally wrote a little bit on my creative process at the end of Chapter Fifteen, but it fits much here now that the story is completed. Here it is for your reading pleasure:

*\*I started to write this story after thinking of an idea: if at the end of Say Uncle, when we see the list of various characters that Uncle Grandpa has visited, what if it wasn't just limited to those characters? Since freaking SWAT Kats are on there, it's clear that the only qualifications for being part of this shared universe is that the show had to have aired on Cartoon Network at one point.*

*From there it was thinking about what would be the most interesting choice of a crossover. That's where One Piece came in.*

*One Piece is one of the few anime I legitimately enjoy and I thought Luffy and Steven would be a great pair. The question then became how to set it apart and to think of an interesting hook. The standard is to have the characters meet either right in the middle of a Straw Hat fight or on one of the two ships. What if Steven met with one of the villains first and, being innocent, would start out thinking Luffy and the crew are bad guys?*

*Enter the practically blank slates of Mr. 5, Miss Valentine, and Miss*

Goldenweek.

*There has always been something about these characters and Baroque Works as a whole. They always gave me a Red Ribbon Army vibe, and I love me some Red Ribbon Army. I loved the Miss Goldenweek cover story and I loved the bond the three of them shared. In addition, the whole Baroque Works saga was always in my top four One Piece sections (along with Arlong, Impel Down/Marineford, and CP9 for those who were curious.) I thought a civil war was a good place for Steven to grow up a bit. Of course he needed surrogates in the One Piece world and these three fit the bill!*

*I see Steven as a barrel of optimism who will either annoy the crap out of you or bring out the best in you. What better way to show that in this world by redeeming three villains right off the bat? I knew I wanted Miss Valentine to be a sympathetic, maternal type figure who had her own self-doubts once Baroque Works left the picture. She is great to write but I always worry about making her into a Mary Sue. I've had her replace Nami in the current arc not to further give her spotlight but to subvert expectations about Steven's healing powers and to examine how dangerous a Devil Fruit's power could be if one was sick.*

*Miss Goldenweek was just an extension of the character traits Oda hinted at: bored, lazy, but effective and loyal to the people she cares for. If she's a painter there has to be some kind of soul in there. I'm writing her as someone who knows that the potential is there but hasn't had a reason to think about it before Steven, who she has connected with in a way that is unfamiliar to her. Of course, she's still bored which not only allows Steven a bit of a contrast since he is NEVER bored but I could use her as a tool to space out during scenes that HAVE to play out the same as in the canon.*

*Finally Mr. 5 kind of grew organically. I initially planned him to be guarded and snarky, but I came to realize that he's better as a guy who tries to act reserved but is actually overly dramatic. I've given him a minor rivalry with Sanji as there is no way that both Miss Valentine and Mr. 5 traveled together for years and didn't have some kind of relationship. Since Sanji loves practically everything that has legs, of course he'd fall for Miss Valentine and of course*

*that would rub Mr. 5 the wrong way. Are they actually in a relationship? No. Could they end up in one? Maybe. Maybe not.*

*As for their names, I didn't want typical common names. Genevieve is the patron saint of Paris, which works since Miss Goldenweek believes that real painters wear berets (apple berets, but berets nevertheless). I gave Miss Valentine the name Petrea after Petrea Burchard, the voice actress for Ryoko from Tenchi Muyo. Mr. 5's name was the hardest since nothing I thought of fit him. I looked at Japanese names, but it wasn't working. Finally, I decided on Damian after Damian Wayne, Batman's son. Why? No reason at all besides it sounded cool.*

*For the B-Story with the Gems, I knew from the beginning what shows I wanted to include. Dexter's Laboratory and Powerpuff Girls were some of the biggest first original shows the network developed, so they had to at least be seen at the beginning of the journey. Powerpuff Girls in particular was great as the monsters on that show already resembled Corrupted Gems. Samurai Jack was included to continue with my Genndy Tartakovsky love. Plus how cool is it to imagine Connie and Pearl fighting with Jack?*

*As for the story itself, I'm constantly amazed at the high level of comments, favorites, and follows it has received. I strive to give you guys the best possible story I can provide that is true to both Steven Universe and One Piece. I hope I am succeeding. I've got some good things planned for the future so stick around and I'm sure you might find something enjoyable out of it. I'd say we are at the halfway point of the story I initially set out to write, but I've since thought of new directions to take it after I reach that point. I'm not sure if you are aware, but I actually write these chapters in real time so things change subtly as I churn them out. Just a fun tidbit.*

Now that we are all caught up, let us get into it!

## **Chapter One:**

Ah, the exposition chapter.

Basically, this chapter does not have much substance, but it sets up our story's MacGuffin: the Rifting Stone. Since "Say Uncle"

established the concept of dimensional hopping and showed that the Gems could peg Uncle Grandpa as a reality warping character, I felt this fit right in with a world that contained a "Wailing Stone." There really wasn't much to the item beyond its intended purpose in the story, but I have been collaborating with **jmr46718** and he actually created a really interesting function for the stone beyond the expanded explanation I gave in Chapter Seven.

On to the *One Piece* side of things! Again, it is very easy just to have the main characters of the two series meet off the bat; but I thought it would be interesting if Steven landed with the villains of the arc. Miss Valentine and Mr. 5 were my starting off point and I worked on it from there. I basically explained my thought process behind choosing these two and why I portrayed them as I did back in Chapter Fifteen. In this chapter, however, they really are blank slates. I hadn't truly settled on how I wanted to portray Mr. 5 and I only had vague ideas about Valentine.

Overall, this chapter doesn't do much beyond get the ball rolling. It's rather cliché and even ends with the old "main character faints" trope. HOWEVER, it is very important for checking off several steps on Steven's "Hero's Journey," or the Monomyth cycle. What is that? Why, it is a narrative template initially developed by Joseph Campbell which details the steps a hero typically undergoes on an adventure. While not set in stone, more often than not you can apply this concept to any story involving a protagonist going on a journey. Both Luffy and Steven undergo their own "Hero's Journey" in their respective shows, but Steven is going on his own quest here and, as such, he follows several of the archetypal steps here. There are three sections to the cycle: Separation, Initiation, and Return. Since we are still setting up the story, Steven will be stuck in the first third of the cycle for the first few chapters.

In this chapter, Steven is given a CALL TO ADVENTURE, namely the mission to find the Rifting Stone. Since he is a Gem and deals with magical people nearly every day, one can count the Gems as giving him SUPERNATURAL AID. Finally, he CROSSES THE THRESHOLD by activating the Rifting Stone and landing in the Grand Line. Admittedly, he does not have a choice in that matter, but he will make that choice willingly later on.

## Chapter Two:

In this chapter, we start to see the hints of how I will eventually portray Miss Valentine/Petrea. I decided that she was a cold individual with a soft side that she repressed after suffering in the past (as detailed in Chapter Nine). Steven was the first person to truly compliment her since that point. Oda made her dream to be a chocolatier, so it makes sense that she would respond to his enjoyment of her food so well. The character development might have been a bit fast, but I tried to balance it out by her having self-doubts on how easily she fell into depression. Of course, that comes much later, but it is worth mentioning here.

In addition, this is the beginning of Petrea's running comments about how Steven needs etiquette lessons. It is obvious she never watched Ronaldo's documentary before it was pulled from TubeTube or else she would see that Steven is actually a gracious host.

Obviously Steven would need to figure out things about the Grand Line since he is the one truly affected by the crossover status of the story (at least initially). Since he was homeschooled by the Gems and probably did not look beyond what Pearl presumably taught him, I decided that Steven, like most children and teenagers, really only knew about pirates from media. If I had to pick the pirate related shows/movies he watched (since he really didn't read for most of his life until he got grounded), I peg him for *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *Peter Pan*, *Treasure Island* (probably the Muppet version. Yes, Tim Curry exists in my *Steven Universe* world), and *Pirates of Penzance*. Mind you, all of those have come up in this story so far, so you all knew that.

Speaking of things that come up in the story, here is my one line of foreshadowing that "Say Uncle" is canon in this story: "I don't really know. I think I'm from another dimension. I went to another dimension this one time but I didn't realize that it was actually another dimension until later. It was kind of weird and we don't like talking about it..."

The only other thing of note about this chapter is I really had to look to see if cars existed in the *One Piece* world. One's first instinct is to

write it off immediately, but think back to Logue Town: Buggy used his ability to create a little car! It makes you think, doesn't it?

### ***Chapter Three:***

My first little song verse! I wouldn't necessarily say that any of the little lyrics I thought up were very good, but *Steven Universe* is a very musical show. You need to have some kind of short songs to stay true to the characters. As Greg would say, they all would probably be B-Sides. Still, it allows for Steven to become the crew's musician and would later prove to be a quirk that Petrea would come to like about Steven.

I'm not sure if anyone picked on it, but the bit where Damian mentions that he isn't a florist was intentional. Technically it should be a BOTANIST, but Damian thinks that he is smarter than he actually is. I initially wrote him as sarcastic and full of himself, and while those things are still technically true, he became a bit more rounded as time went on.

By deciding that he is coming along on the journey, Steven has willingly **CROSSED THE THRESHOLD** and set himself on his true Grand Line adventure. Entering the Wax House can be considered **ENTERING THE BELLY OF THE WHALE**, the final part of the Separation section of the Monomyth cycle. From this point on, there is no turning back for Steven. He is a part of this quest whether anyone wants him there or not.

We also are introduced to Mr. 3 and Miss Goldenweek in this chapter. For the most part, this is all taken directly from canon, but it was important to retain. Regardless of what will happen to Mr. 5 and Miss Valentine, they were still members of Baroque Works and would still focus on their mission to retrieve Vivi (and to make a whole lot of money). The only difference is that they would try to hide it from Steven as much as possible. Mr. 3, on the other hand, has no such reservations and would rather make the money and kill the kid.

Overall, Mr. 3 is just a dick.

### ***Chapter Four:***

Ah, Miss Goldenweek: the character that reviewer **Reishin Amara** described as "a character fan fiction writers have never gotten." She really is a hard character to write, since her laziness is her main character trait. As such, finding her voice was very challenging, but is actually one of my favorite things about this story.

This chapter might contain some of my favorite Steven moments. He is just so innocent and Miss Goldenweek just doesn't know what to make of him. At first she kind of views him as a nuisance and a chore, but slowly she warms up to him. This also marks the beginning of my running character trait for her where she sees something and wants to paint it. If you were a painter and saw something like that, even in a world of Devil Fruits, I feel like you would want to immortalize that. Vidalia has Amethyst as a muse; Genevieve has Steven.

The ending was important because it is the moment where Steven realizes exactly what kind of a situation he is in. He is conflicted about a lot, since he has never met a human criminal or murderer before. How would he react? Well the answer was already given in the form of Lapis Lazuli. He was the only one who believed in her despite stealing the ocean and breaking Greg's leg. Of course he would not let something like Baroque Works being a criminal organization affect his views on its members so long as they express a will or desire to better themselves, as Miss Goldenweek begins to do here. Steven is like Superman: he is the ultimate redeemer of souls...or at least that is what he wants to be.

### ***Chapter Five:***

Our first Straw Hat has arrived: Sanji!

The first thing I thought about was to keep Sanji cursing...and I immediately decided that yes; yes he had to. As such, this became the first true running joke in the story. Sanji coming into the wax house was yet another part of the established canon, but I used this as the first true divergence (discounting Miss Goldenweek's lack of presence at the Mr. 3 fight) from Oda's plot. We actually have a Baroque Works Agent answering the phone, which adds more credibility to the call than Crocodile not realizing that Sanji isn't Mr. 3. This sets up a brick joke that finally paid off in Chapter Twenty-



Three: Obi-Wan Kenobi. Why did I make Steven call Sanji Obi-Wan? Simple: I wanted him to be able to say "Help me Obi-Wan Kenobi! You're my only hope!" when he would be captured by Crocodile later on. Did you pick up that I am a *Star Wars* fan yet?

Beyond that, the only other thing of note in this chapter is Genevieve, my own name for Miss Goldenweek. I had liked the names **F\*ckthesystem125** chose for these same characters in his fan fiction *Luffy's Renewed Adventure* and had actually decided on not having their names begin with the same letters as their codenames to set myself apart. Genevieve was my first choice to be for Miss Valentine, but then I looked up the name and realized she was the Patron Saint of France. That was too perfect not to use for Miss Goldenweek, so I figured why not and let it be regardless if "Goldenweek" and "Genevieve" begin with a "G."

## **Chapter Six:**

This is the chapter where I started figuring out Mr. 5's character.

At first, I thought about making him purely sarcastic, but it wasn't enough. This became even more apparent when I realized that it would fit better for a character like Genevieve to counterbalance when she wasn't being purely lazy. By giving him a "Big Damn Hero" moment with stopping Mr. 3, he changed from snarky to overly confident and cocky. I like to think that he believes that he is playing it cool, but as he spends more time with Steven, his over dramatic tendencies come out more.

Speaking of Mr. 3, his quip about the "agonizing ruination of a noble spirit" is modified from a quote spoken by Dr. Hurt in *Batman R.I.P.*

This chapter also introduced the new names I chose for "The Mr. 5 Pair:" Petrea and Damian. As I mentioned already, Miss Valentine was named after Petrea Burchard, the voice actress who portrayed Ryoko Hakubi on the English dub of *Tenchi Muyo/Universe/In Tokyo*. I actually run a blog (*No Need To Review Tenchi*) where I attempt to review in detail every episode of the franchise, so I have a soft spot for the show and Burchard was always one of the highlights. As for Damian...I literally tried dozens of names to see if they would fit. In the end I narrowed it down to Damian and

Tomisaburo (named after Strom Shadow from *G.I. Joe*), but Damian won because I love Batman way too much.

Damian entering the fire to save Mr. 3 and the Straw Hats shows us that he might be a better guy than the canon Mr. 5 might have led us to believe. Given his ability to create explosions, it makes sense that he has a bit of a resistance against fire. It ALSO is subtle foreshadowing of his dream to be a fireman.

By this point, Steven has faced his first TRIAL on his adventure: facing Mr. 3 and confronting Petrea about her actions. Technically, one could count the talk with Petrea as the ATONEMENT WITH THE FATHER/MOTHER, since she has kind of been a small maternal figure for these few chapters, but the real version on this step occurs later on in Chapter Twenty-Five when Steven confronts the Gems about the Straw Hats. For the record, we are now in the second section of the Monomyth cycle: Initiation. Mr. 3, however, is completely different as Steven fails in his plea to appeal to his better judgement. It is his first true failure on this quest, save the fact that it wasn't: he failed at getting to Mr. 3, but he DID reach Damian, which allowed for Mr. 3 to be defeated.

Note that Mr. 3 was not killed. That would have caused problems for both Impel Down later on if traditional canon was followed and for Chapter Sixteen, which I will discuss when I get there.

### ***Chapter Seven:***

This chapter and the one that follows seem to be the chapters that got a majority of my readers hooked on the story. That pleases me to no end. Honestly, if I had to peg the one creative idea I had for this story, it would be the usage of Uncle Grandpa in this way.

But I am getting ahead of myself.

The character interactions are important to show just how out of place Beach City feels without Steven around. He is the glue that seems to keep these people together. Yes, you have had episodes like "Island Adventure" where Steven has vanished for a period of time, but the Gems literally lost him while they were watching him. They have suffered many losses, but losing Steven is hands down

the worst possible scenario for any of them.

I will say that I am surprised nobody picked out my reference to *Mystery Science Theater 3000* in this chapter: "Usually when I see a giant glowing ball in the sky or something, I just repeat to myself that it is Gem business and I should really just relax." (If you don't know why I included it, just look up Mayor Dewey's voice actor...and then watch every episode you can find.)

The expanded explanation of the Rifting Stone contains a small mention of a Gem named Citrine. This was a name I chose for my *Tenchi Muyo/Steven Universe* crossover (*Steven Muyo*...which will be reworked and revised in the future) for a scientist in an extended flashback. I am sure that she will have no further impact on the story beyond that nod to my other work.

Of all the Gems, I find Amethyst to be the hardest to write. This is why I gave her the idea to contact Uncle Grandpa. I feel she would have been the one to reach that conclusion since she disregards the rules far more than the others. Of course, it would not have been thought of if not for the combined efforts of Greg and Connie, who added an outside perspective on things.

### ***Chapter Eight:***

Ah Uncle Grandpa. I am not a fan of your show, but I can respect you.

Unlike several people, I found "Say Uncle" to be hilarious. It is a modern day "Duck Amuck," especially the moments where the Gems are trapped in limbo. Thankfully, that episode gave me the perfect inspiration for this story and a place for us to go. If it was not for that episode, this crossover would not exist. Hopefully this story can give you a new appreciation for its absurdity.

There are a few references to Cartoon Network shows of the past. Otto Osworth was the main protagonist of *Time Squad*, and is notable for being one of the few names NOT on Uncle Grandpa's list in "Say Uncle." When Uncle Grandpa "channels his Uncle Fester," that is my lone reference to the 90's animated *Addams Family* cartoon that aired on Cartoon Network. I loved that show, especially

the neighbor that Rob Paulson voiced with a Paul Lynde impression.

Most of the interactions with Uncle Grandpa and his menagerie are lifted directly from that episode, since I do not have any other true exposure to the characters (I tried to watch an episode...yeah, it wasn't my thing). Apparently I did a good job at capturing their voices, so that is a plus. Of all of the *Uncle Grandpa* characters, I love Pizza Steve because he is basically Adam Devine in everything he has ever done. I included a reference to a "Brownie Ders" as my nod to *Workaholics*. I feel like *Uncle Grandpa* would be better if they had the entire cast of *Workaholics* as anthropomorphic food.

Now the real meat and potatoes of this chapter is my CN Multiverse theory (no relation to *Multiversity*, the Grant Morrison comic). How I view this is that any show that appeared on Cartoon Network at some point is a part of a giant, spanning multiverse. This explains how things like *Transformers* and *Star Wars* can technically exist but Cartoon Network is unable to air them anymore due to rights. The three layers of reality are the traditional Cartoon Network, Toonami, and Adult Swim. For all intents and purposes, Miguzi was just a sublayer of Toonami. Every person mentioned on there was some kind of host of Toonami, with The Joker of course coming from the April Fools special where he sent a virus to the Absolution. And yes; that was a *Hamtaro* reference.

Townsville was included here to showcase where some of the Corrupted Gems ended up...I guess that subplot is closed...

### **Chapter Nine:**

As per *One Piece* tradition, parties after successful missions are a must. This is Steven's chance to truly meet the people he signed up with. Thankfully, they seem to get along. It helps that Steven and Luffy are really similar characters in a lot of ways. The Baroque Works characters...not so much.

As Genevieve pointed out in the next chapter, she never really interacted with the Straw Hats, so her forgiveness came much easier. One of the main plot points in my version of the Drum arc was Vivi forgiving Damian and Petrea, which starts here. Damian doesn't necessarily care about it as much, as he kind of sticks to

spending his time with Zoro. Petrea, however, needs it to move on. We have now reached her next step of character development: self-doubting resentment of her past. We got a little bit of that in Chapter Six, but the conversation with Sanji is the first to truly get that point across.

Also, I made her an orphan, because OF COURSE she would be. Clichés people; you've got to love them!

The choice to have Steven heal Nami and not Petrea was, again, not to give an increased focus on the new characters but to show how dangerous a Devil Fruit user could be if they were sick. Imagine how dangerous someone with Mr. 5's power would be if he could not stop sneezing...it would be bad. Speaking of powers, the subtle comments about the Kilo Kilo Fruit in this chapter were actually an oversight initially, but I realized that it could work well for expanding her power set. Several people in other fan fictions already gave Petrea the ability to shift the weight of other objects (*Shinobi of the High Seas*, I'm looking at you...) so it was not unheard of.

### ***Chapter Ten:***

We now get to see Steven at his lowest point here. It is bad enough that his family is out of his reach, but here we see how being unable to save everyone is affecting him. It starts with Petrea, which he could not heal, and how he is dealing with it. This continues on with his conversation with Luffy about death. He is a young boy who does not care for violence. Being a pirate, as great of a life as it seemed, is probably not the best place for a boy like Steven. He is forced to make a big decision in this chapter and, as such, grows up just a bit.

In addition, we get to see how Genevieve sees everything. I like to think that Genevieve would get a kick about following the Straw Hats because of all of the incredibly things she can later paint. I didn't want to write out how Wapol came aboard Merry, so having her space out due to boredom allowed me to bypass most of that. Wapol is incredibly pompous, but I enjoyed writing him under Genevieve's spell. It's basically a Jedi Mind Trick.

Oh, I almost forgot. Steven is, of course, singing and referencing

The Beatles. If you didn't know that, we can't be friends any more.

### ***Chapter Eleven:***

The scene with the snowmen and the follow-ups to it in the subsequent chapters are some of my favorite moments in the story. Of course Steven would pine for his family and have them on his mind as he built a snowman. The fact that Genevieve would pick up on that was touching.

For the most part, this chapter only has two things of note to talk about beyond the snowman. The first is *Samurai Jack*, because why not? The other thing is the beginning of the Damian/Sanji rivalry. While I don't necessarily see Damian and Petrea as a couple, I do consider them to be really good friends. Sanji, however, sees Petrea as a beautiful woman. Obviously the two would have friction.

I think that about wraps this chapter up...oh. The blinding light... yeah...

### ***Chapter Twelve:***

Let's talk Lufven:

Lufven is one of the first original characters I have ever made, and to be honest, was not a part of the original story. I had completely disregarded Steven fusing with anyone until the reviewer **Skysword** brought it up. It was then that I remembered that Wapol combined Chess and Kuromarimo and I realized that it would work thematically to create my own fusion. As it stands, Lufven remains one of the most memorable moments of this story, to the point where it has been immortalized in fan art (thanks again **Betsybugaboo!**). I'm still amazed that it worked.

Being a fusion of Luffy and Steven makes Lufven the second Gem to use male pronouns. That is a pretty interesting concept in itself that wouldn't really matter, but is worth pointing out. The attacks came rather naturally. Steven is not necessarily a character known for fighting, but it is natural for him to create naturally defensive moves. It will not be until Chapter Fifteen that he gets a legitimate attack, which comes from Steven understanding exactly what he

would have to do to stop Wapol.

Beyond that...I really don't have anything to say about the chapter. It is kind of self-explanatory. The "Let the slaughter begin" line is from *Transformers: The Movie* (among other sources, but I will always link it to Frank Welker's Megatron).

### ***Chapter Thirteen:***

Oh hai, Chopper!

Part of this chapter was written in Chopper's perspective, which was fun to write...that's about it. Most of this chapter is pretty much taken directly from canon, with the biggest divergence being Petrea instead of Nami and the bit in the beginning where Steven tries to explain fusion.

Seeing Dr. Kureha fulfils another step on Steven's "Hero's Journey:" MEETING THE GODDESS (which is a description only she would use to describe herself). She helps heal everyone in the party as best as she could, bringing Steven back to his whole self after becoming part of Lufven. Of course, the person who she truly tries to help heal is Chopper, as shown in the next chapter.

Finally we have yet ANOTHER reference to Grant Morrison's Batman run: "Backstory? Not interested."

### ***Chapter Fourteen:***

Again, most of this chapter is taken from canon, but there are a few moments I am particularly happy with: the snowman and the snow angel.

This is the chapter that shows Vivi starting to work past the fact that Petrea, Damian, and Genevieve were a part of Baroque Works. A small moment like seeing Genevieve, a notoriously lazy character, take the time to create a piece of artwork to bring a smile to Steven's face goes a long way.

The snow angel was something I debated about. Would angels technically exist in the world of *Steven Universe* if holidays like Christmas do not? I figured it wouldn't matter in the end, since it is a

powerful moment that shows Steven's compassionate side and gives Chopper a reason to believe that humans can look past him being a "monster." This part also includes a small part where Steven's gem causes the snow to turn pink...I totally forget when I thought of it, but it fit so well to tie Steven and Chopper together.

Finally, Steven here has finally accepted that he would have to fight Wapol. This is the APOTHEOSIS, or the hero seeing the world in a whole new light after taking in everything he has learned. Does Steven want to take it to the next level? Not at all, but he will do what he has to in order to protect his new friends. This is signaled by Steven using his shield in an offensive manner: throwing it like Captain America...or STEVE Rogers.

...I'm not the first person to make that connection, nor will I be the last.

### ***Chapter Fifteen:***

The first of two Lufven fights...and the one that makes the most sense.

When I remembered that Chess and Kuromarimo were combined, I immediately knew I needed to have Lufven take offense to that. Wapol is a disgrace as a pirate, which pisses off Luffy, and is now disgracing fusion, which pisses off Steven. The two combining here makes sense and Wapol was never exactly an important opponent for Luffy to fight. Heck, Wapol's two biggest contributions beyond serving as the antagonist in this arc were to the Reverie scene and for creating Wapol Steel later on.

The party scene at the end is important for a few reasons. We now have Vivi finally making her peace with Petrea, ending that small subplot on a high note. Petrea was the one actively seeking redemption so it meant a lot to her to be able to get that closure. The other main point of the party is the part with Steven and the painting. The boy is homesick and having a picture of Snow-Garnet really hit home. It allows for Genevieve to have hidden depths to pick up on how to connect with a sobbing Steven, but shows that she has no idea how to react when presented with him uncontrollably crying. She didn't realize that the snowman was anything other than just



that. Nami, however, is smart enough to read between the lines and remember who "Garnet" was.

If you haven't picked up on it, I really want to capture all of the characters' voices as best as I can. While the story is important, without good character development and interaction, the story will fall apart and be uninteresting. If you have a good grasp on all of the characters, the revised story beats come naturally and organically.

### ***Chapter Sixteen:***

*Star Wars* and Batman. Bet you weren't expecting to see THAT in this story?

The *Star Wars* section was included to add to the Gendy Tartakovsky shows that I have been including (*Dexter's Laboratory* and *Samurai Jack*...sorry *Sym-Bionic Titan*. I couldn't fit you in). Tartakovsky, of course, worked on the *Steven Universe* pilot before the character designs were finalized. This is not *The Clone Wars*, but rather the one from 2003. General Greivous' quote was taken line for line from the last episode of the original run.

The main reason I wanted this was to give Greg a lightsaber for a short amount of time. I knew it wouldn't last long, but I had this image of Greg slicing the sea stone cage open, giving him something to do. It worked out for a nice little moment where he was more aware of what was going on than the Gems, which is rare in a combat situation.

Speaking of Greg, based on his comments in the beginning of the chapter, they have already visited the world of *Ed, Edd, and Eddy* and *Johnny Bravo*.

Connie was also a big player here. Though it wasn't truly touched on more in this chapter, this was the first time Connie encountered death. Seeing death in a movie? It is fine because you have no relation to the action. Seeing it in real life? Not so much. This set up her talk with Steven in Chapter Twenty-Eight and her small breakdown in Chapter Forty-One.

Batman...well, *Batman: The Brave and the Bold* was one of the best

shows on Cartoon Network in years and is truly on par with *Justice League Unlimited*. This version of Batman was no stranger to dimensional visitors, hence his inclusion here. Bat-Mite was the key to moving the story along. Bat-Mite is aware of every version of Batman to exist and since Batman has aired on Toonami AND on regular Cartoon Network, I now had a logical explanation to get the Gems to the Absolution.

The information about the Absolution Sara is spouting comes directly from *Intruder II*. In addition, if you couldn't figure it out, TOM mistook Greg for Carl from *Aqua Teen Hunger Force*. Tom Scharpling, for those of you who did not know, appeared on the show as Willie Nelson...but not THE Willie Nelson.

When TOM is pulling up various places Steven could be, he lists off a few names. We have got references to *G Gundam*, *Sailor Moon*, *Transformers*, *Tenchi Muyo!*, *Dragon Ball Z*, and *Dragon Ball*. Before I decided to have TOM send them straight to the *Once Piece* world, I was going to have the Gems travel to each of these places. The *Sailor Moon* section would have had Greg be super excited to meet her, since he is a fan canonically. This ended up being combined with the Batman section. The *Tenchi* section would have had them continuously ending up in the Masaki residence with them worrying that they were stuck in a time loop, since the three *Tenchi* shows are not connected to each other at all. However, the jokes were cut since it made more sense to just get them to the Grand Line, which worked out for the best.

We now have the return of Mr. 3! Honestly, my one regret of this section was having Steven take the painting that Genevieve made of him in Chapter Four back in Chapter Nine. It would have been more powerful if the Gems found the painting on the island and feared for the worst. Bringing Mr. 3 as their guide gave the Gems a good reason to make it to Alabasta. I debated having an additional chapter of them being forced to deal with Mr. 3, but it wasn't necessary to the story and it would have taken away from the reveals in Chapter Nineteen and Chapter Twenty-Three.

### ***Chapter Seventeen:***

Steven is totally the kind of kid who would "play" a musical in his

spare time. This is my bit of foreshadowing to show that this musical is on his mind when we get to Chapter Twenty-Two.

The training with Zoro is unseen for the most part, but I hope to expand upon that in the next section of the story. Steven is not inherently a violent person, so beyond throwing his shield, he needs to become more creative with his bubble and shield. We see some of his newfound creativity in Chapter Twenty-Three and Twenty-Six, but there is so much more he can do. Reviewer **Fox Boss** actually has some creative ideas on how to give Steven some new abilities, so we shall see what I can come up with them in mind.

This chapter also sees the discussion about how to handle Crocodile. It became clear that purely taking out Crocodile in the desert before he made his move and without any witnesses would not exonerate Cobra at all. I managed to work my way around that particular issue in the later chapters, but if Luffy took down Crocodile in regular canon during his first fight, it would have solved nothing. The people would not have believed Cobra's story, the government would just see it as a pirate fighting a Shichibukai, and Baroque Works would continue to plague Alabasta.

Makes you think.

## ***Chapter Eighteen:***

Oh hai, Mr. 2!

Before we jump on that, we have two minor references in the beginning of the story: the names of the potential island. "The Land of Chocolate" is, of course, from *The Simpsons*, but "Oatmeal" is, from all things, *Frosty the Snowman*. A random reference to be sure, but I am curious if anyone picked up on it.

Beyond introducing Mr. 2, we also have the follow up to Steven's call with Crocodile back in Little Garden. "Tiger Millionaire" was one of my favorite Season One episodes and I continue to reference it because it is Steven's only alter ego. Of course he would use it when put in a tense situation. Genevieve, being one of two people who were in the room when the call was made, would remember it because it was a decisive moment for her. I like to think that she has

a really good memory that she doesn't acknowledge just because it is too much. If this story ever had its own *TVTropes* page, she would definitely be on the "Brilliant, but Lazy" page.

Genevieve and Steven also have a nice moment together where she tells him to focus on his feelings for Connie. I know I put the two in a lot of situations, but I wanted to make it clear that there would be no pairing between the two. That does not mean that she does not have feelings for Steven, but more in an older sister kind of way. The two are the youngest ones on the *Going Merry* and it is only natural that they would form a bond, especially since it was Steven who turned her life around.

### ***Chapter Nineteen:***

There is not much to say about this chapter except Steven's overly complicated plan was kind of a response to Luke Skywalker's plan to rescue Han Solo in *Return of the Jedi*: absurd and overly reliant on chance. Seriously, if you have never thought about the opening of *Return of the Jedi* (which who hasn't?), do so. Everything is reliant on Jabba making stupid mistakes time and time again. Steven, being a young kid, has no idea how the real world works. He looks at everything in terms of archetypes and stereotypes, yet can understand that there are morally grey characters like Lapis and Mr. 2. He's an interesting kid, that Steven Universe.

Um...anything else happen in this chapter? I like when Damian and Zoro get drunk. Beyond that, there isn't much to talk about.

### ***Chapter Twenty:***

Oh hai, Tashigi and Smoker!

As with many *One Piece* fans, I love Smoker and Tashigi. You always know you are in for a treat when they show up. Thankfully, the two were included in this part of the manga, so I got to write them too. At this point, Tashigi and Smoker were only going to be side characters in this section of the story, as in the manga. However, between this appearance and their later resurgence in Chapter Twenty-Three, I thought of the idea to take them back to Beach City (returning to Beach City was always a part of the plan...

how we GOT to that point changed from my early ideas to what was actually written. More on that later).

I liked the idea that Steven would befriend Tashigi, because OF COURSE he would. As stated in the story, he had no idea what the Marines were or even thought two seconds about being a criminal. He has an optimistic outlook on life and everyone in it. When he sees Luffy and the gang on a noble quest to do what is right, he takes their status as "good guys" at face value. This almost came to bite him in the ass back in the beginning of the story and very nearly did the same here.

I think I kind of modified just HOW a Black Den Den Mushi works, but since they have barely appeared in *One Piece* itself, I feel somewhat justified in it.

### ***Chapter Twenty-One:***

Oh hai, Ace!

Good old Ace...doing nothing! No, I did not change his role in the story at all. I must have disappointed at least one person. Still, I used his appearance to do two things. The first was to acknowledge that there actually existed a Blackbeard in the "real" world. Will this seemingly trivial mention come into play later on? Perhaps... perhaps not. What is the second thing you ask? "I can't! I have to go now! My planet needs me!" Get the joke? (If you don't, finish the quote...).

Steven here is starting to understand just what exactly he signed up for. This adds to his APOTHEOSIS, realizing that he is a criminal in this world. Though he dwells on it, he comes to accept it thanks to Genevieve, who pulls him out of a potential depression rather fast. This works out well for Steven, as he is given a reward (this may or may not be a step of the Monomyth cycle depending on which version you are looking at): a new ukulele. With his instrument in hand, he is now officially the Straw Hats' musician.

### ***Chapter Twenty-Two:***

This chapter was a bitch to write.

The beginning with Damian and Petrea arguing was something I rewrote more than any other part of this story. It kept seeming too cliché for my liking. I finally found a tone that I liked, but it still seems a little forced. However, it shows that Steven is now starting to take the lessons learned from watching the Gems and adapting them into his new environment. Character growth people!

We have finally reached Spiders Café and the rest of Baroque Works. It made sense to have Paula be the most suspicious one of the group. She seemed to be the one member of Baroque Works who actually seemed sensible, so of course she would be the one to question why a young kid with paint on his face who sings and impromptu song is asking questions about a criminal organization.

Speaking of the song, it is my first attempt to do a parody of "I Am the Very Model of a Modern Major-General" from *Pirates of Penzance*. While the later song is more akin to the recap at the end of season three of *Reboot*, this is a more direct version of it. Fun fact: I actually wrote this while I was on my way home from a wake to keep myself in a positive mood. Take that as you will.

I debated on having Steven sing another song on the way to Rainbase and have Mr. 1 secretly enjoy it, but I didn't want to overdo it. Besides, we had to get to Crocodile!

### ***Chapter Twenty-Three:***

Crocodile is one of my favorite *One Piece* villains (if not my favorite one) and writing him was a joy. He is one of the truest villains in the show but is actually both smart and a legitimate threat. Writing him as a cocky bastard up until he realized that he was played was great and bouncing him off of Steven gave way to a lot good material.

Steven calling Crocodile a "codfish" is, of course, a reference to Disney's version of *Peter Pan*, as is the song "Never Smile at a Crocodile."

One might wonder just HOW Nico Robin can lock up Steven and the gang in a sea stone cage. That is a very good question. The answer might surprise you.

The banana gators were, of course, first referenced back in Chapter Four to be set up for here. In addition, we also have the payoff to Steven calling Sanji "Obi-Wan Kenobi" all the way back in Chapter Five. We've got quite a few callbacks in this chapter, don't we?

Steven's dedication to his friends is truly shown here by almost dying in the water. Steven has been growing since he started out on his quest. He has started to master his bubble, but he is still part human. He has to push himself to his limits to free his friends. Thankfully, Genevieve did not eat a Devil Fruit or else Steven would be a goner.

Speaking of Steven, our boy has suddenly gained quite a confidence boost. He is not afraid of Crocodile at this point. He is just the representation of Vivi's pain and is treating him like a villain on a Saturday Morning Cartoon. Damian and Petrea are, obviously, worried that Steven is going to do something stupid, but Crocodile is just the tiniest bit fascinated by his audacity. Beyond that, he dismisses him as nothing more than a child.

The chapter ends with an image that I had in my head since I thought about writing this story: the Crystal Gems ready to face down Crocodile in the hidden room. Overall, this chapter was IMMENSELY satisfying to write and to reread. A lot of great moments all around.

### ***Chapter Twenty-Four:***

All plot points have finally converged in Alabasta (well...save Vivi I suppose, but she IS in the country). The Gems have arrived and are pissed. They have literally travelled across space and time to find their boy and where do they find him but in a cage. Crocodile beware.

This is probably the best fight sequence I have ever written and, probably, will ever write. I am not the best at writing descriptive fighting, but I can actually visualize this fight and see how it could turn out. Of course Crocodile would dominate the Gems initially since they haven't exactly figured out how this world works and are basing him just as another human. Garnet, however, could easily stop Crocodile in his tracks. It allows for a callback to the "Beach

Party" episode of *Steven Universe*, where they created glass by striking Amethyst down as hard as possible in the sand. Lightning works the exact same way.

Meanwhile, we finally get our touching reunion between Steven, Connie, Greg, and Lion. Connie, of course, gets along great with the pirates right off the bat (much to Tashigi's disappointment). Greg... well he is just happy to see his son again. The Gems, however, are not happy about ANYTHING...save Amethyst I suppose. As the chapter goes on, Garnet warms up to the Straw Hat crew a bit more, but Pearl will remain apprehensive about them for some time.

Oh, and Steven gets jealous of Greg. Fun times.

### ***Chapter Twenty-Five:***

Continuing on Steven's journey, we now have the true ATONEMENT WITH THE FATHER moment: where Steven confronts the Crystal Gems about his friends. They manage to see just how attached the pirates are to Steven, and Steven to them. When Garnet says that pirates are "awesome," you do not question her.

Pearl is the odd Gem out. She does not care that much for her company and feels awkward and out of place. Zoro sharing a small moment with her went a long way, which in turn will allow for Pearl to fight with him during Chapter Twenty-Nine. It makes sense that the two would have a connection given their love of swordplay.

I like the idea of Greg being eternally out of the loop. He has had a hard time coping with the loss of his son and literal dimensional hopping. This turned out to be a good framing device for my second "Major-General Song" parody, which I wrote on New Year's Day. I'm actually happy with how it turned out. I'm not sure how many of you actually like the musical aspects of this story, but this one ended up being okay. It was too much to truly be included as part of the actual story, so it being an omake worked around that.

### ***Chapter Twenty-Six:***

We have now reached the biggest part of Steven's quest: THE



ORDEAL...or at least the first part of it. I refer to his fight with Crocodile. This moment is hands down the most controversial part of this story, and for a good reason.

See, the biggest complaint (outside of my typos) I have gotten for this story is robbing Luffy of important moments and for shoehorning Steven into them. This has best been articulated by reviewer **BemmyBean**, who pointed out that Steven riding on Luffy's coattails is rather pointless. I can easily see everyone's point and I agree with it. It worked out well with Wapol, because fusion actually MEANT something in the fight. There was a reason for fusion to occur. This fight...less so. I know Steven being there and the fusion was forced and awkward.

But that's the thing: the fusion was supposed to be out of place.

This chapter was supposed to show the dangers of overly fusing. That is why the first thing that happens to Lufven is he gets stabbed like canon Luffy did. Lufven would have and should have lost. The sole reason Lufven worked for this chapter was because of the healing spit.

No, SARDONYX is the one who robbed Luffy of his moment.

Lufven did not win the fight against Crocodile. He just helped Sardonyx win. I will say I liked the idea of Sardonyx playing croquet with Crocodile and the electricity from her hammer is what stopped him, not Lufven's bubble. Sardonyx made sense to me to beat Crocodile because of Garnet's powers (while stealing a quip from *X-Men*). Does it take away from Luffy? Yes and I promise that in the future I will be more mindful of that, but Crocodile was the one person the Gems actually had a stake in fighting. This is why Garnet later sits out on her fight: she did her job and it is now up to the *One Piece* characters to fight their own battles.

Still, I understand the controversy behind it and will keep it all in mind as I continue to write the story.

On a completely different topic, we get our first true look at Nico Robin. She was already intrigued with Luffy's presence before the story began, but Steven was a completely unknown quantity. The

boy was respectful and seemed to treat her with more kindness than anyone she had ever met at this point. I thought it was natural that Robin would become attached to the Gem, which would strengthen as they continued to interact.

Another tiny thing: the opening description of Steven in the sand is practically word for word how Anakin Skywalker describes it in *Attack of the Clones*.

Finally, we have Smoker and the Marines. Bringing it back to them allows for Steven and Sardonyx to get bounties and for reasons that have only been hinted at. The presence of a giant woman like Sardonyx is troubling for the World Government and, by this point, Smoker hasn't realized exactly WHY it would be an issue. He would be more focused on why Luffy would give Crocodile to him. The ramifications of this have yet to truly be explored...

### ***Chapter Twenty-Seven:***

Mr. 1 pulls a Boba Fett in the beginning of this chapter. When in doubt, reference *Star Wars*.

This chapter was more on the humorous side than most of the other Alabasta chapters. We get to see just how the Gems react to the odd world of *One Piece*, including a bunch of giant ducks. I might have cheated by saying two people can fit per duck, but I stand by it.

We get to have a nice little Connie and Genevieve moment, which compliments several of Genevieve's interactions with Steven in this arc. She has this big sister instinct for the boy and is genuinely happy to see that Connie is as good of a person as Steven thinks she is. I had to go back to "Full Disclosure" to see what type of phone Connie has. It makes sense that Priyanka gives her a flip phone. I agree with her on that front.

My favorite moment in this chapter was Greg getting picked on by Amethyst. I can just picture Tom Scharpling screaming about a giant sea cat. Actually, Greg was probably the easiest character to write in this whole story. The Crewniverse team created such a distinctive character that it is hard to screw him up.

## ***Chapter Twenty-Eight:***

Our first fight chapter!

It was very important to me to let the *One Piece* characters retain variations of their big moments in these fights while still keeping the Gems in character. A character like Garnet could easily stop these people in two seconds. This is where the idea of the Gems kind of acting like mentors came into play, especially Garnet. She realizes more than anyone that this is not her fight and allows Usopp, Chopper, and Damian to do their stuff. It is also an opportunity to see who these people are and gauge the integrity of Steven's friends.

Of course, Damian having bomb powers puts him at a MAJOR advantage to the likes of Lasso. He can handle the explosions because he IS an explosive man. This is brought up in the story with Usopp, who is able to retain a variation of his speech from this fight. It is not necessarily referring to Luffy's dreams, but to the crew as a whole.

We get a few more references in this fight: Miss Merry Christmas tells the fighters that they are in "[her] world now, not your world" which is from *The Princess Frog*. In addition, Damian says he has "better things to do today than die," just like Springer in *Transformers: The Movie*.

The second part of this chapter deals with Connie's growth and Steven's utter horror. This is a big moment for the two of them. They have never experienced true human deaths before this adventure began. Connie came to this realization back in Chapter Sixteen, which is why she is able to adapt to it a bit better than our hero. Steven is helpless as he watches all of these innocent people die around him. It takes Connie to snap him out of it, much to the amazement of Genevieve. He just has to accept it as a natural part of life, the final moment that could be counted as his APOTHEOSIS.

One thing that is brought up time and time again is the show's theme song. It is either done in full or is quoted by the characters. It serves as the overarching theme for the story. When someone believes in another person, it inspires them to do great things.

Steven believes in everyone, and everyone believes in Steven.

### ***Chapter Twenty-Nine:***

The last chapter I wrote as an unmarried man. I literally finished this the night before my wedding, and I have to say I am pretty proud of how it turned out. If Chapter Twenty-Four contained the best fight scene I have ever written, this contains the second and third best scenes.

The Zoro/Pearl Mr. 1 fight was the biggest part of the chapter. Unlike Garnet, Pearl actually engages in combat. She has been a swordfighter for centuries, so she would wipe the floor clean with warriors like Mr. 1 and Zoro. The key factor, which is brought up even more in Chapter Forty-One, is the human factor. Humans can be far more unpredictable than Gems, especially in this world. Devil Fruits are an unknown factor to Pearl, and she doesn't yet know how to react to them. The moment where everything clicked was when I decided to have Pearl attempt Santoryu, which showed the level of respect she had for Zoro. No matter how much blood he shed or how many times he is hurt, he keeps going. Pearl, a resilient knight in her own way, would connect to that rather easily.

We are also treated to a Greg/Nami scene. These two are the two most useless characters in a situation like this, so to have the two of them boost each other's confidence was important to me. Greg here quite literally brings up the trope of "The Load," which for my non Tropers out there can be considered as the liability. Think of how Greg was a major liability in the fight against Lapis. This is actually brought up in *One Piece* canon during this point, as it is Nami's first TRUE fight scene.

Greg, for his part, has lost the lightsaber. Retaining it would have made him MASSIVELY overpowered during the fights, so this forced him to be rather pragmatic in how to handle the situation. Regardless, you cannot have a lightsaber without causing injury to a hand, so poor Paula is involved in an unfortunate accident.

Speaking of, having Paula fight Amethyst came about purely because the two have hedgehog fighting techniques. Amethyst would naturally get herself involved more than the other Gems and

would be the one who would push herself too far. I was not sure exactly how long to wait until she would be reformed, especially since her longest time in canon to reform was only a few hours. Is this technically considered an example of "Stuffed in the Fridge" if it is perfectly in line for the character?

Finally, we continue to see more growth in Petrea as she takes on Miss Doublefinger for Amethyst's sake. It does not matter how battered she is; she will fight to save Alabasta and to avenger her new friend. Paula's quote about "throwing away your life" is from *Transformers: The Movie* and Petrea's response is from the sixth episode of *Tenchi Muyo!* (my favorite episode in the franchise).

### **Chapter Thirty:**

I wrote the first section with Tashigi on my honeymoon during a moment of downtime. It is just a fun fact.

Kohza was important to have to the story as originally conceived by Oda, but I really had nothing for him to do otherwise. I decided to merely use him as a way for Steven and the girls to navigate the palace. One thing I am unsure anyone picked up on was his nickname for Cobra: Nebra. I don't blame you if you didn't catch it, but Nebra was the 4kids name for the character. Why they did it I have no idea, but I believe it had to do with them being in charge of the *G.I. Joe* license at the time. I mean, when I look at Vivi's dad, I immediately confuse him for Cobra Commander or Destro. I guess that makes Pell Raptor, Cobra's bird man accountant.

The main purpose of this chapter was to explain just how I could resolve the Baroque Works situation without Crocodile being involved. By convincing Mr. 2 to surrender himself and explain what was truly going on behind the scenes, I could still have him retain his friendship with the Straw Hats and get him to Impel Down. Since Miss Goldenweek's cover story does not occur in this version of *One Piece*, this lines things up perfectly for the Impel Down arc later on (that is, if it gets covered).

We also are given a new glimpse of Damian's emotional side. He might not be in a relationship with Petrea, but he cares deeply for his partner. He has turned from a no-nonsense assassin to a truly

emotional character who likes to act "manly" but is prone to cry at things he reacts strongly to. He would never admit it to anyone, but think about it. He wants to be a fireman even in canon. That shows that he has a strong desire to save lives and help people. It makes sense that he would have these hidden depths.

Oh, Usopp quotes *Invader Zim*. That is all.

### ***Chapter Thirty-One:***

The Initiation section of the Monomyth cycle comes to a close as Steven retrieves THE ULTIMATE BOON, or the salvation of Alabasta from Baroque Works. This has been the reason why he put aside his quest to return home all the way back in Chapter Six. Amusingly, he does not really do much to affect the outcome other than what he did all the way back in Chapter Five: redeeming Genevieve.

Genevieve has her own "Big Damn Heroes" moment where she casts aside her laziness to save the kingdom. The technique she uses here (making a Color Trap large enough to affect an entire crowd) comes from her cover story. This was a simple way for the Baroque Works members to be separated from the citizens of Alabasta, though I think Luffy would be offended by the thought of it.

Petrea also has her own big moment in the story where she realizes she can actually alter the weight of other things. Could Garnet actually lift up the bomb by herself? Yes. However, she saw Petrea helping in one of the many splintered paths provided to her through Future Vision. Since arriving, Garnet has been used to give advice to the Straw Hat crew and, as such, felt it would be a good way to leave a positive impact on Steven's friends. If anything, she could easily have stepped in to save the day.

One might argue that Luffy is a bit too quick to want to have Robin join the crew. I thought of it as Steven's feelings about Robin rubbing off on Luffy when they fused, especially after how she saved them in the desert. I mean, he didn't have too many reservations in the actual canon as well, so I felt justified.

The return of Mr. 3 was something I played around with a lot.

Initially, I had Mr. 3 fight Steven and Connie in an elaborate sequence, but it didn't really work. After I scrapped that, I had Sanji fight him on equal terms. Again, I couldn't get it to work as well as I would have liked. Instead, I used him as a way to show that Genevieve's powers work and as a gag. Like Mr. 2, in order for the Impel Down and ESPECIALLY Marineford arcs to work, Mr. 3 needed to be sent to prison. This was accomplished rather nicely here.

The ending of this chapter raises two very important questions. Why was Garnet concerned about the reappearance of Sardonyx? Why is the World Government that interested in the Gems? The answers will come in time...

### ***Chapter Thirty-Two:***

We are now in the final third of the Monomyth Cycle: Return. Part of this chapter deals with Steven's REFUSAL OF RETURN. He argues why they need to leave the crossover, since the Gems abandoned their home. Our boy is still very much a child and needs to be reminded of everything that is waiting for him.

This leads to an extended reference to *Tenchi Universe*, which is the story about the carnival. The carnival represented (in that story) how the various characters parted ways after a lengthy adventure. However, even though they were separated, Tenchi was reassured by Ryoko that each of them would return in time. That is Steven's hope here: that he will see his friends again after the adventure ends. Fate, of course, has specific plans for our hero...

This chapter contains the famous bath house scene, known primarily for Nami's "Happiness Punch." Initially, I thought about having it play out like in canon, but having Steven just be confused. All of that changed when I realized that Connie and Genevieve would be in the bath too, making it in VERY poor taste (admittedly, the original scene isn't in the best taste either). This allowed me to give Greg a legitimate parenting moment, something few and far between.

Finally, we get the bounties. As I said before, **jmr46718** thought of Sardonyx's bounty. My original idea was "Giant Pompous Magician,"

whose bounty I raised after the initial publication of this story. Speaking of bounties, I had originally put Zoro's epithet as "Demon Hunter." I'm not going to lie...that was an error. I tried justifying it to myself as the Marines and World Government seeing the Gems as "demons" but since Zoro didn't hunt them, it did not make sense.

I'm not perfect folks. Just ask my wife.

### ***Chapter Thirty-Three:***

Goodbye Vivi.

Her departure is largely unchanged as in canon. I debated on having her join the crew, but I had no real reason to do so. If you would like a good story that gives a valid reason for having Vivi join the crew, look no further than *Luffy's Renewed Adventure*.

However, it is here that shit gets real. At this point, Steven is getting ready to return home after one final party. This is the MAGIC FLIGHT. However, they have no idea that Garp is inching forward to them. This leads to another step: THE RESCUE FROM WITHOUT, which is getting aid from an unexpected source. In this case, we get Smoker and Tashigi.

Clearly the World Government's actions have caused Smoker to have serious concerns about this entire situation. Smoker is the kind of person to put aside his own vendetta if the situation warrants it and the rescue of an innocent child is clearly worth it in his eyes. In addition, Tashigi would be the most concerned for them, as she is the one with the clearest emotional connection to the boy. The most important thing to make clear is that this was not meant to be a truce with the Straw Hats, but rather a means to getting Steven and the Gems away from Garp before they got hurt.

I originally had a much different idea for how this chapter would have played out: instead of sending Garp, KUMA was sent out to deal with the situation. He would have used his abilities to transport the Going Merry away to Beach City. **jmr46718** explained to me just why that wouldn't work and how I was misinterpreting Kuma's abilities. The two of us tossed some ideas back and forth until we realized Garp would be a good substitute. I am sure some people



were upset that Garp didn't do anything yet by that point, but it was necessary for the story. This same conversation is also where the Plot Contrivance Mode was developed, but I will explain that more in Chapter Forty-Two.

### ***Chapter Thirty-Four:***

Oh hai, Ronaldo!

I am in the camp of people who actually likes Ronaldo, but I know he is not everyone's cup of tea. Regardless, of course he would be the only one to notice Uncle Grandpa's shenanigans all the way back from Chapter Seven, which shows us how much time has actually elapsed in Beach City.

Robin being interrogated by Garnet is a reference to *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (though I replaced "quest" with "dream"). Initially, Garnet asked everything in the form of a question, but I learned that Garnet is unable to ask questions due to her confidence as a fusion. As such, I edited the entire story to reflect that. It wasn't easy.

We also have our one time usage of the "F" word in the story. Given Smoker's situation, I hardly blame him. This is his literal hell right now and one has to feel for him just a bit.

This chapter marks the beginning of Petrea's fear of Onion, which was based on her thoughts all the way back in Chapter Two about the boy. As we see, Onion actually has a crush on her making it a rather interesting dynamic.

*Beautiful Girlfriend Satan* is taken directly from the *Keep Beach City Weird* blog. His cries of "A good ship or a bad ship" are, of course, a reference to *The Wizard of Oz*.

Steven returning to Beach City and talking to his neighbors is the CROSSING OF THE RETURN THRESHOLD. His final task is a simple one: convince the citizens of Beach City that the pirates should stay.

### ***Chapter Thirty-Five:***

This is the chapter where I really get to try to emulate the voices of

the majority of the supporting cast of *Steven Universe*. Personally, I love the Cool Kids (Buck, Sour Cream, and Jenny) since they have very distinctive characteristics. Buck in particular is great and really hilarious as a whole. For someone so laid back, he seems to have a greater understanding of the world.

Pay no attention to Ronaldo's rantings. I am sure that it has no significance whatsoever.

Since this is a Cartoon Network show, I felt that Beach City would HAVE to be a no drinking or smoking environment. It is very similar to Ocean City, NJ in that regard. Poor Smoker and Sanji.

I rewatched "Lars and the Cool Kids" and "Joy Ride" before writing this, which got me thinking about Sour Cream wanting to rave on the Going Merry. Buck's comment about the rave is similar to his "baker's dozen" line in "Joy Ride," but I still find it funny.

Finally, we have Vidalia. Why Vidalia? Well, she is an interesting character who, as of this writing, has only had one true appearance and one cameo. She is the only actual human friend of a Crystal Gem. There are stories that just NEED to be told about these two. Heck, she even realizes that the Gems are rocks. She might not be the most important character in this story, but she deserved a bigger role than in the show, including being responsible for bringing back her Gem buddy. I might have cheated with how she brought back Amethyst, but we are still in "Plot Contrivance Mode" from the previous chapter (though that isn't made known for several chapters).

### ***Chapter Thirty-Six:***

Steven has returned to his home a MASTER OF TWO WORLDS. He is still a pirate and Straw Hat, but has the FREEDOM TO LIVE in Beach City. With that, his technical "Hero's Journey" has concluded. There is still the little matter of getting the Straw Hats back home, but Steven has done what he set out to do: he saved Alabasta and returned home.

As I am sure readers picked up, Steven quotes *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* when he shows the Straw Hats (and Tashigi)

inside. Speaking of references, I am glad **Daxen123** picked up on my Matt Foley reference about Greg's van. God I miss Chris Farley.

Initially, the Game Cubes were called just that, but I revised it after the official canon name for the gaming system was revealed: the Sumy Dolphin. That itself was a reference to the working title of the system. I once saw an image of Sanji and Chopper playing Wii (I think it was on a Google Search) and it stuck with me. The idea that the pirates get competitive when playing *Super Smash Bros.* is inherently hilarious to me, but TASHIGI being drawn into the game makes it so much funnier. If she is going to be stuck in this crappy situation, she might as well make the most of it. Also, Tashigi plays as Samus, Zoro as Link, Sanji as Captain Falcon, and Connie as Kirby. At some point, I need to have these characters play *Mario Party*. I just do. Speaking of, the story was revised after the second series of shorts revealed the *Steven Universe* version of some of the games. I just went with it and made up my own variations.

At this point we get the dreaded confrontation between Priyanka, her daughter, and Greg. Honestly, she has a right to be concerned. How would you feel if your daughter was hanging out with a bunch of older strangers in a house where known magical entities live, especially after just finding out that your daughter is a part of said magical world. She is not that upset that Connie is out doing things with the Gems, it is that she wasn't kept in the loop. She makes valid points and is rather reasonable all things considered.

Tashigi also steps it up to come to Connie's aide. She hates the Straw Hats with a passion, but is dedicated to assisting Steven and Connie. They are the innocents who risked their lives to save her and the people of Alabasta. TASHIGI: FRIEND TO ALL CHILDREN!

### ***Chapter Thirty-Seven:***

Remember when Sadie was featured in every other episode? I miss those days. I loved the Lars/Sadie dynamic and I hope it makes a return in upcoming episodes.

Smoker balancing rocks on his arm was a result of me misremembering his rock balancing hobby back in Logue Town, but I found it to be interesting enough to retain. He is a man of intense

dedication and practice. He could find a way to balance two sets of rocks on each arm while keeping perfectly still.

I found it important that Smoker should find someone in Beach City to relate to, even in the smallest way. I thought about Buck, but the relationship would basically be his lone comment in Chapter Thirty-Nine about how he respects Smoker for doing what he was doing. Sadie came to play when I realized I was depriving her of her character development from "Sadie's Song." There was no reason for her to take the stage since Steven never discovered her singing in the back of the Big Donut. She gives Smoker hope in the people of this world. They might be overly optimistic, but their hearts are in the right place.

The reason why there was a delayed reaction to seeing the portrait of Rose Quartz is a simple: I forgot to include her in the previous chapter's descriptions of the interior of Steven's house. However, it allowed me a perfect segue into giving the pirates (and technically Vidalia) some exposition about what Gems are. This also shows Smoker that maybe this world isn't as kid friendly as he first thought.

We also address Steven's age in this chapter, which came about in a very interesting way. When the story started, I had Steven pegged for ten years old. I was wrong (with a good canon explanation to boot). I edited it as I was writing Chapter Twenty-Six to make his age ambiguous, though the characters assumed he was ten (save Luffy). I debated on saving this joke for the upcoming SECOND PART of this story, but this was a good moment to use it. Plus it preserves the Connie moment from "Steven's Birthday" since she does not know his age yet.

### ***Chapter Thirty-Eight:***

Pearl does not like foul language, no matter how badly Luffy wants to express his desire to "kick someone's ass," which occurs at least once per arc.

Greg is, of course, referencing *Ghostbusters*. However, he realizes that referencing these things in the Burning Room might be rather off topic.

We have yet another made up magical item: the Talisman of Cloth! Steven pointed out in "Lars and the Cool Kids" how he had no idea where any of his clothes came from, so I came up with this! Since he has a giant assortment of the same shirt, it made sense that they were literally magical by design. Of course, Greg would only realize that the Gems have, yet again, kept him out of the loop and never once considered helping him out. Poor Greg.

This chapter introduces us to Doug Maheswaran, who is another character I wish appeared more. Since he is married to Priyanka, I can assume that he is an academic in some capacity. His love of *Les Misérables* mainly stems from the Javert/Val Jean relationship that Luffy and Smoker have. I thought it would be interesting for Smoker to evaluate just how far his vendetta could go. Smoker is a very interesting character as he is defined by his concept of Justice, particularly something that could be called "Situational Justice." Given the amount of times he has had to work with Luffy, he knows that there is something more to him than any of the other pirates he deals with. Does that ever deter him from trying to arrest him? Not at all, but looking at their relationship from an outside perspective might have caused our Marine to reevaluate the situation.

Finally, I initially misremembered Zoro as being twenty-one before the time skip. **Betsybugaboo** pointed out that I was mistaken. As such, poor Zoro was doomed to endure time without his precious sake or beer.

### ***Chapter Thirty-Nine:***

This might be the funniest moment in the entire story: Steven creating the 4kids rap.

It was a moment that I had envisioned from the beginning of the story. Of course Steven would create a rap about his crew. I initially thought about using it for when they landed in Beach City back in Chapter Thirty-Four, but I held off on it to use it for Beach-A-Palooza. I know some people were hoping to see Luffy in drag, but this was so much better. Plus, it gives Jamie something to do in this story.

The song Connie plays, "Tanguera," is a beautiful piece for a tango.

Some of you might know it as the counterpoint song in the *Moulin Rouge!* version of the song "Roxanne" ("El Tango de Roxanne").

At the end of the chapter, we see Robin start to break out of her shell as Luffy and Steven begin to act around like fools. As a person who only knew her mother for a short amount of time, I felt that she would feel strongly about seeing Connie connect with her family. This provides the Straw Hats for a moment to realize that there is more to Robin than just Miss Allsunday. I mean, WE all know that from reading *One Piece*, but they don't.

### **Chapter Forty:**

A very special chapter for me: the one I finished while I was waiting for my daughter to be born (and polished when my wife was sleeping and the baby was being cleaned up).

This is basically a slice of life chapter designed to show just how well the *One Piece* characters are integrating in a world like Beach City. Some things came naturally, like Usopp's love of tall tales meshing with Ronaldo's outlandish theories. They mesh well. Other things, like Robin and Nami at a bookstore, are good for character examination. Robin is 100% the kind of person who would love Edgar Allan Poe. It was also a continuation of the previous chapter showing Robin coming out of her shell. Her journey would, of course, continue on throughout the time in Beach City. Fun tidbit: initially I wrote that Beach City did not have a library anymore (which was a plot point in the cute *Steven Universe* comics. I recommend picking them up or buying them on Comixology), but then the episode "Buddy's Book" showed that it had reopened at some point. When I revised the story to remove Garnet asking questions, I took the opportunity to rectify that.

The training with Zoro, Tashigi, and Pearl was always something I had planned, be it as just sparring partners or as her taking them under her wing. It might be argued that Pearl is portrayed as being far too advanced than Zoro and Tashigi. The key thing to remember is that Tashigi was literally battered around by Robin and Zoro lost gallons of blood not even a week before this chapter. Of course they would not be on their A-Game. In addition, Pearl has CENTURIES of experience on them. The best way to defeat her would be to use

ingenuity, something neither of them were attempting to do.

For the Luffy/Smoker/Garnet section, I was amused to see that the Crewniverse gang picked out real jobs for the Gems. Garnet's job was life coach, which is EXACTLY how I have been writing her. She is in a different league to most of the things that have happened in this story so far. She would rather help everyone around her achieve their full potential indirectly, if only because they mean something to Steven.

Ronaldo's mention of "schwarbage" is a reference to *Batman Beyond*. Actually, his rant about the video game is appropriated from the *Keep Beach City Weird* blog.

I chose not to think exactly WHAT Sanji was doing, but there is plenty implied...

The other big thing that happened in this chapter is, of course, *Star Wars*. At first I was just going to include it as part of a throwaway gag, but then I realized the parallels of Robin and Princess Leia's situation. If I was going to include a scene of them watching *Star Wars*, I was going to make it relevant to the plot and characterizations damn it. This provided a good contrast between Robin and Tashigi's views on the world.

I would like to point out that I initially had Robin compare the Marines to the Empire and not the World Government. **jmr46718** pointed out my error and, as such, I modified it to be more accurate.

### ***Chapter Forty-One:***

The long-awaited return to this story! The first few lines were written along with Chapter Forty, but I realized that the chapter was getting very long and figured it would do better as the beginning of its own chapter.

Smiley's is, of course, a reference to *Cheers*. Greg is, of course, Norm. I guess that makes Mr. Smiley Sam, Barb Carla, Nanefua Coach, and Mayor Dewey Cliff? Would Smoker be Fraiser? These are important questions. Mayor Dewey asking Smoker to be a "cooler" is a reference to *Road House*, the greatest American movie

of all time. It was also a favorite of the entire *MST3K* crew, so of course Bill would love it. Basically, if I included a direct reference to the Mos Eisley Cantina, Paddy's Pub, Moe's Tavern, The Prancing Pony, Swerve's, or the Three Broomsticks I would have covered all of my favorite fictional bars.

Hmm...there is Shakky's and Blueno's bars in the future...there is still hope...

Connie's mini breakdown about *Star Wars* is something I knew had to happen. Regardless of how mature she is, there is no way a girl that young could just have comprehended all of the death and destruction she experienced in Chapter Sixteen without either having an anxiety attack of burying it down in her. Since I don't believe Connie is one to repress feelings like that, it made sense for her to have some kind of a reaction to it. Steven, being Steven, brings her back by initiating a pillow fight, which really is the last thing you do to someone having an emotional breakdown. However, this is Steven. He does it out of love, so of course it works.

We now have some much-needed attention to Damian's dream of being a fireman. There really has been no mention of this at all save some vague guessing during the Drum section of the story and him saving the Straw Hats in Chapter Six. This was always planned and serves as the beginning of Damian's choice to remain in Beach City while he assists with the reconstruction of Beach City Fries.

Amethyst saying "Up and at them" is a Radioactive Man quote from *The Simpsons*.

The rest of this chapter is basically a verbal beat down of Tashigi courtesy of Robin. Basically, everything that happened occurred because Tashigi could not let her preconceived ideas about Robin stop her from making a rational decision. Robin, for her part, was doing something constructive for the group and had turned a poor movie experience into a fulfilling achievement. This moment was taken away yet again by the lapdogs of the World Government, namely Tashigi. The young Marine was already in the dumps about the Alabasta incident so this just compounded her guilt. Will it strengthen her resolve and allow her to be a better Marine or will it make her continuously sullen and depressed? Time will tell.



## **Chapter Forty-Two:**

This chapter was interesting to write, as I wrote from both Peridot's and Onion's P.O.V. This isn't the first time I have written from a character's perspective, but both were uniquely challenging.

Peridot's was a bit challenging as she had no true concept of humanity by this point (and even well beyond this point in traditional canon). It was annoying to refer to everything as a "human" for the most part, but it allowed for an in-depth view on how she would view something like a Devil Fruit enhanced human. She would have no way of knowing if all humans could do what Robin or Luffy did.

Still, poor Greg and poor Peridot.

Onion...oh god. I think the decision to write this with only referring to him as "He" and Petrea as "Her" is just downright creepy. Onion is just a downright odd character in *Steven Universe* and I wanted to exploit that beyond a running gag. Of course this leads right into...

Greg and his Devil Fruit. This was not an idea I had when plotting out this story, but when **jmr46718** suggested it, I realized that I needed something for Greg to contribute. When the next part of the story begins, Greg would just be a liability. I initially tried to give him the lightsaber, but that would make him too deadly, which isn't in his character. This is why I got rid of it all the way back in Chapter Twenty-Nine. **jmr46718** came up with the name and the general outline of what he could do (namely create the *Steven Universe* and *One Piece* background music) and, from this, the Plot Contrivance Mode was developed. Having a musician eat a musical Devil Fruit is just hard to swallow on its own, but having it travel across dimensions randomly? That does not fly unless you add an outside factor: Uncle Grandpa. He is the perfect deus ex machina, but one that has truly been used to its potential. The next section of the story is going to have to stand on its own for the most part...

## **Chapter Forty-Three:**

I definitely played with people's expectations with this chapter. Everybody probably thought I would have Steven unbubble Peridot immediately and get into the events of "Catch and Release." Given

the tightness of the drill story arc, it would be impossible for the *One Piece* characters to get home until they left the barn, which I did not want to do. The question is this: where will the next part pick up in the *Steven Universe*...well...universe? You'll just have to wait and see.

Greg has started to explore his Devil Fruit. This scene is a reference to *Wayne's World*, of which I have no doubt Greg is a fan. If you have a musical Devil Fruit and came from the kind of background Greg had, why wouldn't you immediately think to play air guitar?

The next section has Steven and the gang watching *Crying Breakfast Friends*, which I think got the biggest reaction in this chapter. The characters are all taken from the show and I specifically checked the *Steven Universe* wiki to make sure I got the names right, especially for the second set of references. The first set of references is lifted almost verbatim from *South Park: Bigger, Longer, and Uncut*. The second, and the one that no doubt raised eyebrows, was dialogue taken from one of my favorite episodes of *Steven Universe*: "Sworn to the Sword." Just a joke or subtle Uncle Grandpa manipulation?

Speaking of, though he does not appear, Uncle Grandpa himself has started to truly loom over the story. I have always said that this is not an Uncle Grandpa story, but he is the catalyst to get the *One Piece* characters back to the Grand Line. This had me utilize him as an unsettling presence in background, even though he is not an evil or malevolent person at all. In fact, he is a nice soul. As Nami is probably the most practical of the Straw Hats, I found it funny to have her question the very nature of reality thanks to his unintentional manipulations.

I will be the first to admit that the subplot with the Beach Citywalk Fries is weak. There isn't much substance necessarily, but it accomplishes two things: it gave the conflict between Tashigi and Robin two chapters prior to this and allowed Damian to rekindle his passion to be a fireman, his canonical dream. Obviously not a single person knew that at this point, but this was me attempting foreshadowing and character building. By vowing to see the Frymans' project through, I had a valid reason for him to wish to remain in Beach City, especially since there were not any firemen in

the city. The question is, what will fate have in store for him in the next section?

Steven is totally the kind of person who would text Connie to make sure she got home okay. He also uses yet another *Willy Wonka* quote upon opening the Temple Gate. Gotta love Steven; he's consistent.

The end section of this chapter was half-pulled-out-of-my-ass/half-planned. I knew I wanted to have Connie train with Zoro and Tashigi, but I was stretching the Beach City arc a bit too much. I could not keep Peridot bubbled any longer than I already had, so I thought of giving Connie the challenge of dueling them as a last ditch effort to get Uncle Grandpa's attention.

### ***Chapter Forty-Four:***

I read and take in every single review I get on this story between its posting on and on *Archive of Our Own*, but no review has ever made me think more than this review by **Gammaman**: "When will we get back to the plot?" It is a good question: one could have viewed this entire section as filler, which in the greater Grand Line narrative, it was. However, I really wanted to incorporate more of the *Steven Universe* world into the story. There are two types of crossovers: the dimensional crossover and the historical rewrite crossover (a term I just made up). The dimensional crossover can be something like *A Wand for Steven* by **ShayneT**, where Steven crosses through the Veil into the world of *Harry Potter*. The other option, historical rewrite crossovers, are in the vein of *Transforming the Universe* by **Dalek Prime**, which recasts *The Transformers* and *Steven Universe* all existing in the same world, as shown with the Gems invading Cybertron before The Great War began.

Dimensional crossovers tend to focus pretty much entirely on characters from one medium being sent to another location. Take the recent *Ninja Turtles/Ghostbusters* crossover from IDW, which had the Turtles get sent to the world of the Ghostbusters. Were there occasionally scenes from the Turtle's dimension? Sure, but it mainly a chance to see Ninja Turtles in a world where ghosts exist. I wanted a better balance of the two shows, including giving me a reason to shake up the status quo, specifically by being able to

introduce Peridot (your first exclusive for the next section.) I love writing the Beach City stuff, but I knew that there was no way to conceivably stretch out the scenario presented by "Catch and Release" any longer than I already did.

At this point, the majority of the main plot threads introduced in this story had resolved itself, some of them in this chapter: Steven returning home, the quest to save Alabasta, Operation: Discover Damian's Dream, Steven owing Damian for his clothes, the Gems searching for Steven, Beach-A-Palooza, the capture of Peridot, and the summoning of Uncle Grandpa. The sole remaining plot threads that were introduced but not touched upon in this chapter were the explanation of P.C.M., where Greg's Devil Fruit came from, the freeing of Peridot to learn about the Cluster, returning the Going Merry to the Grand Line, and the completion of Beach City Fries. Discounting the Beach City Fries plot, everything else was addressed in the next chapter. Of course...there is still far more that I want to do regarding the world of *One Piece*, so fret not **Gammaman**.

I am sure there are other settings that the duel could have taken place, but the location from "Sworn to the Sword" was just so well designed. This also allowed for the cute joke about Luffy thinking a flying island would be fun...which if you know *One Piece* than you should know exactly what I am referring to.

Everything Pearl says about Klaripayattu (save the bit about Gems obviously) as well as the type of sword Connie is using are all true. Check it out online. I'll even let you look it up on Wikipedia.

We have a few small references in the first half of the chapter. Greg quotes *G.I. Joe*, which honestly brings up some disturbing implications as though World War 2 was not fought; I suppose the Vietnam War was. Interesting. Steven laughing at Pearl talking to Robin was supposed to be him thinking of Batman, specifically of the Adam West variety. Finally, we have Pearl's announcement to begin the fight, which was modified from the beginning of every episode of *G Gundam*.

Pearl and Genevieve calling Pearl a "Bird Gem" is my nod to her status as the "Bird Mom" in the *Steven Universe* fandom.

The fight was hard to write, as I wanted to portray Connie as an intense fighter like she was in "Sworn to the Sword." The difference was that she had her self-worth, but was rushing into everything to make things genuine. However, Connie is a bit of an overachiever. If she is going to do something, she is going to give it her all, no matter what happens to her.

It was hard to let Priyanka conceivably find a reason to be okay with Connie fighting after sustaining the amount of damage she received. She should have every right to freak out at the implications of Connie wielding a sword. I justified it by her getting mad more with Connie's recklessness and her using a sword itself. She is truly trying to accept what her daughter is doing and, though she might not like it, has to hope that the Crystal Gems will protect her just as much as they do Steven and Beach City.

The souvenirs were supposed to be the true signal of the end of the Straw Hat's time in Beach City, but it was mainly there to set up the Damian backstory. Steven's favorite superhero is Captain Marvel because Zach Callison is the primary voice of Billy Batson in recent DC media (plus he really is the kind of superhero Steven would love the most). Smoker's gift (the Newton's Cradle) is a nod to *Learning to Breathe Underwater* by **RoadsandBurrows**, the first *Steven Universe* fan fiction I read.

Now let's talk about the character of the hour: Damian. I knew I wanted his dream to be a fireman be a joint revelation with his desire to remain in Beach City. I feel like I put as much foreshadowing as I could into this plot point. He made it clear that he was never an "official" Straw Hat, although he does at the section's end, regardless of where he is living. As with Petrea, he is an orphan, but a self-made one to boot. His mother is technically out there, but for all intents and purposes, she is dead to him.

I don't know if it just me, but I find the concept of Pearl and Connie concerning themselves with things like Damian not having insurance or a social security card to be hilarious. These are minor details that almost never get brought up in crossover fiction. Of course, Damian handwaves it and tells everyone not to worry about it.

We now have the beginnings of Petrea and Damian furthering their

friendship beyond the standard Baroque Works partner/friend relationship they had up until this point. Will they be romantically involved? I can't say, but if they aren't then damn. Either way, I like to keep this story as somewhat innocent as I can be given the constraints of *One Piece*. The sheer fact that I have implied that Turkish baths exist in the world of *Steven Universe* is about as far as I plan on going on that front.

Our chapter ends with the third time Uncle Grandpa's name has been used as a plot hook. I apologize for the repetition, but it should be the last time I do so.

### ***Chapter Forty-Five:***

This is it: the final chapter of the first section of this story and the finale of the story I initially set out to write. It was not until I started having correspondence with **jmr46718** that I figured out a good starting out point for the next section, which in itself changed a bit from when we started planning it. I guarantee you there are still plenty of surprises for all of your favorite characters that I have not created.

Uncle Grandpa is simultaneously easy and hard to write. It is fun to think of all kinds of gags to write for him, but the hard part is writing people's reactions to him. It is very easy to just have people repeat over and over how absurd of a situation it is, but you have to keep everything moving in order for the plot to progress. Still, it allowed for gags like Doctor Uncle Grandpa and Uncle Grandpa acting like a *Pokemon* Gym Leader with the Steven Badge. (Get it? Bubble Beam?)

I am sure that my convoluted explanations about how I justify the ability to connect the Grand Line to Beach City can be seen as an ass-pull, but I think it makes sense considering who is involved plus everything I established about the Rifting Stone and the Belly Bag Badge. In the end, the adventure gets to continue so who cares how we do it? The important thing is that we did it.

The conversation with Zoro and Tashigi shows just how far Tashigi has come on this journey. She is still an antagonist to the Straw Hats, but she has come to realize that they aren't as bad as she

initially wrote them off, especially Zoro with his hidden depths. This scene contains a reference to *Harry Potter*...I am sure you can pick it up...

I knew from the beginning that Genevieve was going to stay with the Straw Hats. As early as Chapter Nine, I made it clear that her dream was to be the best painter of HER world, not just in both worlds. It wouldn't make sense for her to abandon that dream when Steven reignited her own desire to achieve that goal. I decided to make her the sole member of the Baroque Works trio to not be an orphan. Of course she would be so lazy that she would not mail her parents regularly. It fits her character.

When Sadie was saying goodbye, I had the idea of her giving Smoker a Lion Licker, which he would have eaten off-screen in Chapter Forty while he was brooding. This would have offended Steven to no end. I cut it when the section was getting too convoluted.

I was having trouble figuring out what to do with Garp, as I knew how to get him away from his fleet and how he left the Straw Hats, but not what to do when he was on the Merry. **jmr46718** came up with the idea of him antagonizing Pearl about Sardonyx, making fun of the fact that Gems are basically naked, and Luffy asking if Gems poop. Truly **jmr46718** is the unsung hero of this story. I cannot express my thanks enough.

The song Steven and Greg sang was, of course, "The Greatest Adventure" from the Rankin/Bass version of *The Hobbit*. I thought it fit the overall theme of a continuing adventure.

Our story began with Steven, the Gems, and the "Mr. 5 Pair" and now it bookends with it. Think of the Smoker scene as a post-credit sequence.

The *Steven Universe* ending was something I envisioned fairly early on, with Steven deciding on releasing Peridot. This set up a hook for the next part of the story, which will feature Peridot as a main Gem character. Of course, the fun for all of you waiting will be wondering WHEN the next part will take place. Will it follow up in the middle of "Catch and Release" or will we meet our heroes around the time of

"Message Received?" You will just have to wait and see. Oh, Steven's dialogue ("If only I could sleep...if only I knew..." ) is lifted straight from another Rankin/Bass Christmas special: *'Twas the Night Before Christmas*.

The final scene with Smoker was something I went back and forth with **jmr46718** about for a bit, but this is what we like to call a sequel hook kids. Since the Gorosei do not have names in canon yet, I just looked up their Japanese voice actors and gave them their names. What is the significance of this scene? How do the Gorosei know about Gems? Why are they afraid of them? How will Smoker take this information? What will happen if the government discovers if the Gems ever return to the Grand Line?

Find out in *A Gem in the Rough Part Two: Gems Without Measure; A Pirate's Treasure!*

Hopefully you learned something new about the story and can reread it to pick up some details you might have missed the first time. Until the next time true believers! Fuehfehfefeh!